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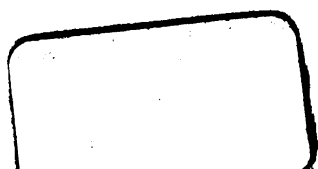
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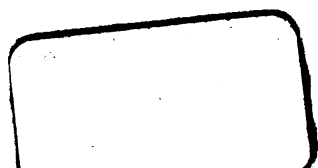
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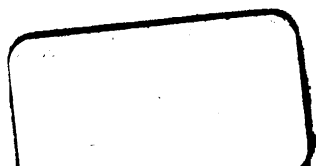
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It was thus that two of the exiles reposed beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree, in a garden outside the walls of Babylon, on the brink of the river. Page 5.

B E N A I A H:
A TALE OF THE CAPTIVITY.

NCW
Peploe

for
28

B E N A I A H :

A T A L E O F T H E C A P T I V I T Y .

BY

M R S . W E B B ,

AUTHOR OF "NAOMI," ETC.

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B E N A I A H.

CHAPTER I.

BABYLON had said, "I am, and none else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children." And God had said, "These two things shall come to thee in a moment, in one day—the loss of children and widowhood." Can we doubt which of these declarations came to pass?

Great Babylon had indeed "sat as a queen" among the nations, and had a wide dominion. Her power was great, and she had been employed in the hand of the Almighty Ruler of the earth as "*a hammer*," wherewith He broke in pieces many other nations. But her pride and her sins brought upon her a heavy chastisement; and she was herself "cut asunder and broken."

Cyrus the Great commenced the work of desolation and just retribution. By the hands of his soldiers Babylon was taught to mourn "the loss of her children," in her streets and in her provinces. Darius followed in his steps, and carried still further the appointed work of vengeance. We are told that he not only slew a multitude of the inhabitants of the glorious city, and put to death 2,000 of her chief men, but he also broke down the outer walls, which have been so celebrated in ancient history; and thus commenced that "*desolation*" which the Lord had so long threatened, and which was afterwards so signally and so literally fulfilled.

In order to the better understanding of our story, the scene of which is primarily laid in the Assyrian capital, it

may be well to give a brief sketch of ancient Babylon, as it has been described by contemporary writers.

The outer walls were built in the form of a square, fifteen miles in length, and the same in width. This immense area was divided by twenty-five streets, running in straight lines across, and again subdivided by the same number of streets, which crossed these at right angles, and cut the whole city into 676 equal squares, each of which was two miles and a quarter in circumference. The streets were 150 feet broad, and the houses which faced them were lofty and highly ornamented, each standing in its own plot of pleasure-ground, while the centre of each square was occupied by gardens and groves and orchards.

From this description of the construction of the city, we perceive that it must have contained a much smaller number of inhabitants than its great extent would at first lead us to expect. A great part of the enclosed area was not built upon, and this must have conduced very greatly to the health and the comfort of those who dwelt in it, and also to the beauty of the very remarkable city.

According to Herodotus, there were two enclosed spaces in the city, one being to the east and the other to the west of the river Euphrates, which ran through the centre of Babylon. The former of these enclosures contained the ancient temple of Belus, or Tower of Babel; and the latter was the site of the royal palace, and the famous hanging gardens. Of these we cannot forbear to speak; for they were, indeed, one of the wonders of the world, and have never been surpassed in any age or by any nation.

The upper garden was a square of forty feet each way, and was supported on several tiers of strong arches, one above another, until the structure attained the elevation of the city walls. The floor of the garden was composed of large stones, sixteen feet long and four broad, which were laid on the upper arches. Over these was a thick layer of reeds and bitumen; then two rows of bricks, well cemented; and, lastly, a covering of strong sheets of lead. On this was placed the mould to compose a garden; and the thickness was so great as to allow large trees to grow in it. The terraces were also similarly constructed, and filled with every

plant that could delight the eye or gratify the taste of the luxurious inhabitants of the royal palace. Flights of steps led from terrace to terrace ; and beneath the open arches which supported each floor were pleasant summer chambers, from which could be obtained fine views of the surrounding city, and the extensive and fertile plain in which it was situated. In the upper terrace was a powerful machine by which water was drawn up from the river below, in sufficient quantities to water the whole of the gardens ; and thus, although but little rain falls in Assyria, these gardens were always green and blooming and beautiful.

Of the Temple of Belus we shall say but little, as its glory had departed at the period of which we write. It was, before Xerxes rifled it of its incalculable treasures, by far the most magnificent edifice in Babylon. Eight towers, decreasing in size as they rose one above another, stood in the square enclosure. On the summit of the topmost tower was a splendid temple, furnished with various articles of gold, but containing no image or statue. But on the ground of the enclosure was a smaller temple, in which was erected a huge statue of Jupiter, in a sitting position, of pure gold, of which precious metal the throne, and the steps, and several large tables were also formed ; and the whole was supposed to contain eight hundred talents of gold !

The walls of the great city were well adapted for the protection of all the wealth which they enclosed. They were eighty-seven feet thick, three hundred and fifty feet high, and sixty miles in extent. On each side were twenty-five gates, opening on the end of each street, and of great strength, being formed of solid brass. A deep wide trench surrounded the walls, which was always kept full of water : and it seemed as if mighty Babylon could defy any power that might be brought against her.

But the Lord had said that she should be brought to desolation ; and, when the appointed time came, neither her massy gates, nor her solid walls, nor her armed men, could avert her fate. The enemy entered into the well-fenced city, and the glory of the Chaldean empire departed for ever.

But the utter desolation of Babylon was not accomplished at once. She continued a great and a powerful city

for many years under the rule of her conquerors; and it is during the reign of one of their successors that the date of our story is fixed.

Artaxerxes had sat on the throne of Babylon for nearly twenty years; and had reigned over his innumerable subjects, of such various races and denominations, with a mildness and benevolence too seldom to be met with among eastern despots.

Towards the Jews—the remnant of the captivity, who still dwelt in great numbers in Babylon and the neighbouring cities—he had shown considerable lenity and kindness. His conduct towards Ezra, and the ample powers which he bestowed on him for returning to Jerusalem, and rebuilding the city, and establishing a Jewish government once more in God's ancient city, are well known to all Bible-readers; and also the many difficulties and obstacles which were thrown in Ezra's way by those who were evil-disposed towards God's people.

Many were the rich gifts with which this king endowed Ezra for the service of the Temple, which he proposed to rebuild for the worship of the one true God; and we are led to believe, from the terms of the royal commission, that Artaxerxes had even acquired a high veneration for the God of his Jewish subjects; for he says, "Let all things be performed after the law of God, diligently unto the Most High God, that wrath come not against the realm of the king and his son." Ezra was empowered to settle all points relative to the religious and civil government of the Jews at Jerusalem, to appoint judges and magistrates, and to punish evil-doers with imprisonment, and even with death; and all this authority he exercised faithfully in the midst of many trials and discouragements for thirteen years, even until the time of which we are about to write.

For this introductory chapter we ought, perhaps, to apologize; but we hope that the interesting nature of the subject, and the necessity for an accurate idea being formed of the time and the locality of our story, will render such an apology superfluous.

CHAPTER II.

BY the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Zion!" Very literally was this plaintive prophecy fulfilled during all the long years of the Jewish captivity, and even at the period of which we speak. Although the actual captivity, so strikingly alluded to by Daniel, had long terminated, the Jewish residents in Babylon were still in a state of bondage. They still mourned for their pleasant and far-distant land; they still wept as they sat in the cool of the evening by the waters of the Euphrates, as they rolled across the extensive and level plain in which the city was erected, or ran through the centre of great Babylon between solid embankments that gave it the appearance of a wide canal bordered by overhanging trees.

It was thus that two of the exiles reposed beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree, in a garden outside the walls of Babylon, on the brink of the river. And thus they conversed:

"It is useless, Jasher, it is worse than useless to spend our time in lamentations over the state of our holy and beloved city, and the disorder which now reigns among our countrymen in Judea. The efforts of the wise and pious Ezra have proved ineffectual in establishing the law, or restoring the religious rites which once rendered Jerusalem the joy of her children, and the glory of the whole earth. We must act, Jasher. We must lend our aid to Ezra in some more effectual manner than idle sympathy. Would to God that we were with him, to strengthen his hands, and assist him in baffling the schemes of his enemies, who are also the enemies of the Lord and His people!"

"That is a vain wish, Nehemiah," replied his companion, a venerable man, with a majestic countenance, on which were to be read the traces of long suffering and deep dejection. "That wish is as vain and fruitless as my lamentations over my state of bondage, which prevented my sharing the dangers and the trials of the heroic Ezra. Gladly would I have joined him, as you well know. My age should not have deterred me from going to behold our unknown, but oh how deeply loved, country, and the place where the glory of Jehovah once shone so brightly! I would have resigned all that I possessed in Babylon to go and die in the city of the Lord; and my brave son Benaiah, yes, and my wife and daughters, would have made every sacrifice, and encountered every hardship and difficulty, in order to behold the land of which they have heard so much, but which we have none of us yet seen with our eyes."

"Hatach refused to release you, did he not?" said Nehemiah, musingly.

"He did; but the refusal was accompanied with so much kindness, and such expressions of esteem and regard, towards both Benaiah and myself, that I could not conscientiously depart without his consent. Indeed, it would probably have been impossible for me to have done so. At all events, I felt that it would be wrong to attempt it; for Hatach is my master. The will of the Lord brought us into subjection to the Assyrians, and at His will, no doubt, the remnant of our race, who still dwell in a strange land, will be set at liberty, and led after our brethren who have returned to Judea. For that time we must wait and pray."

"True, Jasher, we are both of us in bondage; and, however light our chains may be, *they are still chains*; and they bind us to Babylon! My master, the king, treats me with all the kindness and consideration which you meet with from Hatach; and that very kindness only rivets our chains more closely. They regard us as friends, and not as slaves; and, therefore, they are the more loth to set us free. Gladly would I work with my hands at any kind of labour, rather than be the honoured cup-bearer to the king, if I could be uncared-for and unobserved, and so have the liberty of

following Ezra and his companions. But Artaxerxes has hitherto turned a deaf ear to all my expressions of a wish to leave him, even for a time."

"Yes, the king values you very highly," replied Jasher. "I know from Hatach that he regards you more than all his Assyrian servants. May not your favour with him be the means, some day, of inducing him to send further aid to Ezra, and to open a way for the return of all our exiled race to the land of our fathers?"

"May the God of Israel give me the power to bring about so blessed an event!" exclaimed Nehemiah, as he folded his hands and raised his eyes reverently towards the clear blue vault of heaven. "Be assured, Jasher," he added, after a pause, "that I will lose no opportunity of pleading the cause of the noble-minded Ezra and the rest of my suffering countrymen, both here and in Judea. I will labour for their good, even though I may not be permitted to go myself and see their prosperity in the holy city of our God."

"My heart burns, and my spirit is stirred within me," said Jasher, "by the reports that have reached us from Jerusalem. The glorious efforts of Ezra to restore the pure worship of Jehovah, and to purge the people of God from the leaven of idolatry which their heathen wives had introduced among them, are cheering to our souls. But the difficulties which he has encountered in carrying on the rebuilding of the Temple, which Zerubbabel so well began, and the obstacles which have so long hindered the restoration of the wall of the holy city, cannot fail to cause all true sons of Jacob to mourn. While Jerusalem thus lies desolate and defenceless, how can joy dwell in the hearts of her exiled children?"

As Jasher uttered these words in rather a desponding voice, he was interrupted by the approach of Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah.

Hanani looked grave and thoughtful—as, indeed, the Jewish exiles in Babylon were wont to look. But his brother and Jasher saw that some unusual anxiety was now weighing on his mind and clouding his brow.

"What new care oppresses you, my brother?" said Nehemiah, as Hanani came up and stood before him.

"The Grecians have gained a victory over the soldiers of the king," he replied. "Messengers have come from the Persian army with the intelligence that a great defeat has been sustained at the hands of Conon, the Athenian admiral, at Cnidus. These are evil news for us; and must, I fear, add greatly to the embarrassments of Ezra, by giving fresh courage and boldness to his adversaries. The Samaritans, and the Ammonites, and the Arabians, who have so long withstood every effort to rebuild Jerusalem, and set up her walls, will now lift up their heads with still more pride; for they will surely deem that the king will no longer have either leisure or power to defend the Jews against their enemies. The hopes of our nation are indeed fallen very low, and it seems that the Lord has forgotten His own people."

"Say not so, my brother," replied Nehemiah, gently but earnestly; "speak not so faithlessly. The Lord cannot forget or utterly forsake His people. For our many and grievous sins He has chastened us—chastened us long and severely; but He will yet be gracious unto us. He has begun His work of mercy in permitting the return of so many of our countrymen to the land of our inheritance, and enabling them to dwell again in Zion, and rebuild the Temple for the glory of His great name. Surely, surely He will finish the work!"

"True," observed Jasher. "It is true that a Temple to the God of Israel once more exists in Jerusalem; and praised be His name who gave a willing heart to those who devised and carried out the holy work. But what is that Temple compared with the Temple in which our forefathers worshipped? that splendid Temple that was the glory of the whole earth, and in which Jehovah dwelt among His people! No wonder that the aged men, who had seen the Temple of Solomon, wept when they beheld the poor foundations of this meaner building laid! Oh, shall we ever live to see it beautified as God's house in Jerusalem once was!"

"Jasher, my friend," said Nehemiah, somewhat reprov-
ingly, "let us remember that it is still God's house in which it pleaseth Him to dwell. And has He not said, by the mouth of His prophet Haggai:

“I will shake all nations ;

“And the desire of all nations shall come : and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.

“The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts ;

“The glory of *this latter house* shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts ;

“And in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.’

“Great things are here promised, Jasher. Let us not doubt their accomplishment.”

“Such faith as yours, Nehemiah, ought to bring about great things,” replied Jasher ; “but at present our hopes are sadly depressed, and our prospects are very gloomy. This victory of the Grecians bodes no good to our brethren in Judea.”

“The Lord can overrule all events for the good of His people,” said Nehemiah ; “He can make the wrath of the heathen to praise Him, and to work out His own purposes. It may be that the very circumstances which now excite your fears may lead to the accomplishment of our earnest desires : it may be that the king may see the advantage of strengthening the Jews, and fortifying their city as a defence of the frontiers of his dominions. Let us hope and pray !”



CHAPTER III.

IN those gardens of delight of which we have given a faint description, two young girls were wandering about, and enjoying the coolness of the shade, and the freshness of the verdure, and the glowing colours and delicious scent of the various flowers that met their eye at every turn of the winding walks.

It was a very lovely place of retreat from the noise and the heat of the busy streets; and the privilege of walking in these "*hanging gardens*" was one that was dearly prized by those who enjoyed it.

Of these happy few were Zipporah and Rhoda, the daughters of Jasher. We have seen that their father was a Jewish exile, and in bondage to Hatach, a wealthy and powerful Assyrian nobleman. It was not a hard bondage; for Hatach highly valued his Jewish dependant, even as King Artaxerxes valued his cup-bearer, Nehemiah; and he gave him much power over his other servants, and placed much confidence in him.

As being his daughters, Zipporah and Rhoda might have been more highly privileged than other maidens of their race; but it was chiefly on account of their mother, Abigail, that the girls enjoyed the consideration which was accorded to them by the inhabitants of the court and the city of Babylon.

Abigail was the niece of Mordecai the Jew, and therefore a relative of the Jewish queen, Esther, whose story must be so familiar to all our readers. Every connexion of the highly favoured Mordecai had, in a measure, shared in his exaltation; and their descendants were much respected and honoured for his sake. The marriage of Abigail to one of the

exiles, who still remained in a state of servitude, had not degraded her in the eyes either of her own people or of the strangers among whom she dwelt; for Jasher was known to be a man of high birth, and his personal character was one which ensured respect and consideration. His daughters were, therefore, admitted to the society of the children of Hatach, and to that of the most influential of the Jewish families, and even of some of the members of the Assyrian court.

Both of the girls were young—Zipporah, the elder, being only sixteen, and her sister, Rhoda, ten years of age. Zipporah's face at once bespoke her lineage—her large black eyes and raven hair, and clear brown skin, were unmistakably Jewish; and although her other features were more delicate than was usual with her countrywomen, yet she could never be mistaken for an Assyrian. There was a grace and dignity in her air and figure that showed she belonged to God's favoured race; and that, although an exile—and virtually a captive—she was conscious of her inalienable rank and birthright.

Rhoda was of a fairer complexion, and her flowing hair had a golden tinge that made it almost sparkle in the sunlight. The characters of the maidens were also as dissimilar as their outward appearance; for Zipporah was grave and thoughtful—far beyond her years. She deeply felt the degraded condition of her countrymen, and the desolation of the unknown land which she proudly called her own; she entered into every hope and scheme for the return of the whole Jewish nation to Judea; she scorned the frivolous amusements in which the Assyrian women, and many of her own countrywomen, spent much of their time; and she lost no opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of the past history of God's chosen people, and their hopes of a restoration to His favour and their own lost privileges and possessions.

But Rhoda was of another temperament—lively and joyous, she was as a sunbeam in her father's house, and was the idolized darling of her parents and her brother and sister. She was full of warm affections and kindly feelings; but her thoughts never dwelt long on any one subject—

especially on any subject which brought gloom and sadness. She was as happy as a bird in the gay gardens of Babylon, and knew not—or rather heeded not—that Babylon was but a gilded cage, in which she and her family were imprisoned.

Zipporah had almost the entire charge of her young sister; for Abigail had much to attend to in the household of Hatach, as well as in her own small but comfortable home; and she placed the most implicit confidence in the steadiness and discretion of her eldest daughter.

So it came to pass that the two girls spent most of their time together, and that Rhoda loved her graver sister with a love that was tinged with veneration; and that Zipporah entertained feelings that were almost maternal towards the lovely child, and felt in her an interest that was more than sisterly. Probably she loved her all the more fondly because she was so different to herself.

Slowly they walked along the various terraces of the royal gardens; for the sun was high in the heavens, and was pouring down his bright and burning rays with a power and a brilliance of which we in these northern latitudes can form but a faint idea.

Often they paused to rest beneath the shade of some overhanging tree, before they mounted the broad marble steps that led up to the terrace above them.

Zipporah was sad and pensive, and Rhoda's wild spirits were subdued by her sister's example, and also by the overpowering heat of the day. She observed an unwonted silence, and only occasionally left Zipporah's side to flit about among the gay parterres, or to seek the cool shade of the arched chambers that opened upon each successive terrace.

Beneath these arches she raised her clear young voice in a sort of wild chant that was re-echoed on all sides, and then died away in the subterranean passages. She listened delighted with the effect of her efforts, and then she flew towards Zipporah—who stood gazing out on the wide-spread city and the plain that extended so far to the west—and, catching her hand, drew her into the cool apartment, crying out joyously, "Come and sing with me, Zipporah!

Let us chant your favourite psalm, and listen to the soft echoing sound that goes away into the distance so sweetly."

"O Rhoda," replied her sister, as she yielded to her request, and accompanied her beneath the arched roof, "*How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* In our own home, in our Jewish father's house, it is sometimes hard to forget that we are exiles and captives. But here, in this spot, with the palace of our conquerors beneath us, and their proud capital around us, and everything to remind us that we are *strangers in a strange land*—I cannot sing the praises of the God of Israel." And her heart swelled with emotion, and tears shone in her uplifted eyes.

"Why are you so very sad to-day, dear sister?" said Rhoda, gently, as they sat down on a low marble bench within the shade of the upper terrace. "You are often grave, but I have not often seen you weep. Has any evil befallen us?"

"Rhoda, my darling, is it not a continual evil that the heathen bear rule over us, the chosen people of the Lord? Is it not a bitter evil that our noble father, of the royal race of Judah, is in bondage to an Assyrian idolater? Is it not an evil, an evil never to be forgotten, that we dwell here, far away from the blessed and glorious land that Jehovah gave to our fathers; and that those of our countrymen who have returned to that land are suffering hardship and persecution at the hand of their enemies, and are sorely hindered in building a house for the Lord, and setting up again the walls of Zion?"

"But, Zipporah," replied the child, rather wondering at this unusually strong expression of her sister's feelings, "you never saw the land of Judea; why do you care so very much for it? You were born in Babylon; why cannot you love this beautiful city, and be happy in it, as I am?"

Zipporah smiled sadly at her sister's reasoning, and answered her in a tone that she tried to make more cheerful, "Long may you be as happy as you are now, dear Rhoda; but I cannot feel as you do now. It is true I never beheld the land which God gave to our father Abraham, or the

city which He made so strong for Himself. No, I never saw them with my bodily eyes. But in dreams I often visit that beauteous land. I see the hills, covered with vineyards and olive groves ; and the fertile valleys, standing thick with corn. I see the wild ravines and rocky cliffs that surround the city of God. I see the glittering temple which King Solomon built, and I hear the solemn chorus of the worshipping multitude who met in its courts to celebrate Jehovah's praises. I behold the High Priest in all his gorgeous robes, as he entered into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people, in that sanctuary where the glory of the Lord dwelt between the cherubims ! Yes, Rhoda, I see and hear all this in my thoughts by day and in my dreams by night ; and then I open my eyes, and I awake to the sad reality !”

Zipporah's eyes were flashing, and her usually pale cheeks were glowing while she thus passionately depicted the thoughts and imaginations of her ardent spirit. But now the light faded from her eyes, and the colour from her cheeks, and she continued in a slower and sadder tone, while she pointed to the city and the country beyond it : “Yes, Rhoda—the sad reality. Look at this vast city of Babylon, with its high square walls and its straight monotonous streets built in intersecting lines, on each side of the broad and almost stagnant Euphrates. Look down at the royal palace which surrounds these gardens, and which our father has told me would more than contain the whole city of Jerusalem. Look across the river at that colossal temple, dedicated to a false god, and profaned by cruel and idolatrous rites. And look beyond all this, at the wide and level plain which stretches as far as the eye can reach, unbroken by rocks or mountains, and only varied by straight canals, bordered by rows of willows ! Can all this compare with the natural beauty of the land which was as *the garden of the Lord* ? O Rhoda ! shall we ever behold that land ? shall we ever sing *the Lord's song* in the courts of His own temple ?”

Zipporah was overpowered by the emotions which her own descriptions had aroused, and she burst into tears. It was but seldom that she thus suffered herself to be carried

away by the natural impetuosity of her character, and Rhoda was astonished and distressed at her apparent grief. She tried to soothe her, and Zipporah strove to conquer her feelings and to resume her habitual composure of manner, in which she had partially succeeded, when Rhoda suddenly exclaimed, "Benaiah is coming towards us. I think he is seeking us, Zipporah!" and she sprang forth from the shadowy chamber to meet her brother on the terrace.



CHAPTER IV.

BENAIAH was indeed seeking his sisters; for he wished to communicate to Zipporah the evil tidings which had reached Babylon with regard to the defeat of the army of Artaxerxes at Cnidus—of which we have already spoken—and the gloomy forebodings of his father Jasher; who, as we have said, feared greatly that this defeat would embolden the enemies of the Jews in Judea.

Benaiah always confided his thoughts and feelings to his eldest sister. Her zeal and patriotism led her to sympathise in all his hopes and anticipations for the future liberty and even glory of their people; and her ardent spirit and firm faith in the promises of God, as declared by the prophets, led her to speak words of encouragement whenever Benaiah conversed with her on the prospects of their race and their country.

It is true that Zipporah sometimes felt desponding; and, as in the instance just related, gave way to gloomy feelings and sad comparisons between the past and the present condition of her brethren—both those in exile, and those envied but sorely tried ones who had found their way back to the home of their forefathers. But such desponding moods were never of long continuance; and Zipporah was ever ready to cheer her brother, and to animate him to hope for better times, when he too might be permitted to return to Judea, and take an active part in the trials, and the dangers, and the labours of his countrymen.

"You look sad, my sister," he said kindly, as he led Rhoda back to the seat where Zipporah had remained, and was struggling to meet Benaiah with one of her bright sunny

smiles. "I fear the news I bring will not help to cheer you ; for, if I guess rightly, it is our country's troubles that you mourn, and not any private cause of vexation."

"It is true, Benaiah," replied his sister ; and tears again rose to her eyes, as she prepared to listen to some fresh story of cruelty and oppression exercised upon her unhappy countrymen, either in Judea or in Babylon. "It is true that I have been trying to describe to Rhoda the beauty and the blessedness of the land of our fathers, as it has so often been described to me. And then the contrast—the painful contrast—which this heathen land, in which we are exiles, offers to the eye and the mind, came over me, and I could not restrain my feelings. But it is weak of me to dwell thus on what is irremediable. If by any efforts, any sacrifice—even that of life itself—I could help toward the liberation of my people, and their full restoration to our rightful inheritance, how gladly would I give it all ! But we are captives, and captives we must remain until the God of Israel makes bare His arm, and executes judgment upon the heathen. Then we shall return in triumph to Judea, and joy and gladness shall again be our portion ; for the Lord will again dwell among us. Benaiah ! when will all this come to pass ?"

"Not yet, Zipporah, not yet. At present the heathen nations bear rule over the earth, and Judea is trodden under foot of the enemies of God and of our race. The king—our *master*," and Benaiah's lip curled as he spoke the word, "is indeed less cruel than those who have gone before him, and more willing to show pity to our brethren. But he has not yet given effectual aid to those who are striving to rebuild our beloved city and temple ; neither has he yet given liberty to all those who still dwell in Babylon, and who pine to join them in Judea. Some hope my father and the rest of our soldiers entertained, that he might be moved by the intercession of Nehemiah to pass a decree in favour of our harassed and persecuted brethren, and to prevent their surrounding enemies from hindering the work of the Lord at Jerusalem ; but sad tidings have reached the court, that the Grecians have defeated the king's army, with great slaughter, and more soldiers must be sent from Babylon to fill the ranks again. Surely Artaxerxes will now turn a

deaf ear to all that even his favourite cup-bearer can urge in favour of the Jews; and they will be left to defend themselves as they can; and the work must then be stopped."

"This is grievous news, indeed, my brother," said Zipporah, sadly. "Is our father much cast down by it?"

"He is greatly dejected," replied Benaiah. "He told me that Nehemiah is still full of hope and of faith that the set time of the Lord is near at hand, and that He will bring deliverance to His people, even out of those circumstances which seem to be so much against them. He is a noble-hearted man, that Nehemiah! His lofty spirit never fails. Would to God that he were appointed our leader, to conduct us back to Judea! I would follow him to the death!"

"Would to God we could all do so, Benaiah!" exclaimed Zipporah, fervently. "I believe that no difficulties, no hardships, would affright any of the children of Israel, if only they were permitted to turn their faces Zion-wards. Even our little Rhoda, here," she continued, as she laid her hand fondly on her sister's shoulder, "even she—who declares herself so happy in this fair city, and is so content to be a Babylonian captive—would, no doubt, be glad to journey towards that lovely land of gardens and vineyards—that land once flowing with milk and honey, but now so desolate!"

"I would go anywhere with you, Zipporah," said the child, gravely and earnestly; "I should be happy in any place where you and our parents and Benaiah dwelt. But why should you so greatly desire to leave Babylon, where we live in peace and plenty, and where we have so many friends?"

"Because, dear Rhoda, this is not the Lord's land, as Judea is. Because here they worship idols, and offer sacrifices to those who are *no gods*. Because Jerusalem is our home, and Judea the heritage which Jehovah has given to us; and here we are strangers and sojourners—without a home, without a temple, without freedom. Rhoda, you must love that land which is afar off, better than this in which we now dwell as captives."

The young girl looked wondering in Zipporah's animated

countenance. She had never seen her so enthusiastic, or heard her give such vehement expression to her patriotic feelings. Rhoda could neither comprehend nor sympathise in them, but she believed that all her sister said, and did, and felt, was right; and therefore she said no more in favour of the glorious city which lay spread beneath them, or of the gay and fragrant garden in which they sat.

"I know, my dear child," continued Zipporah, "that this spot is to you as the garden of Eden, and that you can fancy nothing more beautiful than this great Babylon, and the fertile plain around it. But all this glory and beauty must be destroyed. All these magnificent towers, and palaces, and temples—yes, even those solid walls which encircle them—must be laid low in the dust. The word of the Lord has declared it; and we know not how soon He may bring it to pass."

"Yes," said Benaiah, as he rose from the seat, and passed out from the shaded chamber into the bright sunlight, followed by his sisters. "Yes, Rhoda, all that you now see, so magnificent and so glorious, will one day be a vast desert. Babylon shall be no more remembered. Thus saith the Lord by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, 'I will make it a possession for the bittern, and pools of waters: and I will sweep it with the besom of destruction, saith the Lord!' And our own King David—writing by the direction of the Lord—thus addresses this great city: 'O daughters of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones!'"

Rhoda shuddered at the fearful ideas which her brother's words called up. She was looking down on the wide street that led from the gardens towards one of the city gates; and she saw many children playing there, and she heard their merry voices as they called one to another in their thoughtless joy; and she pictured to herself those very children in the ruthless grasp of a conquering foe, and then dashed upon the pavement of the street. She hid her face against her sister's dress, and murmured softly,—

"O Zipporah! can the good God, of whose mercy you

so often tell me, be willing that such cruel deeds should be done ? ”

Benaiah heard her ; and he replied to her inquiry.

“ It is for the sin of Babylon that she is to be destroyed, Rhoda. This spot has been marked by the pride and rebellion of man against his Maker ever since the days when the Tower of Babel was commenced in this plain of Shinar. There it stood, yonder, where now the Temple of Belus lifts its lofty head, and defies the God of heaven and earth, and insults His majesty by the idolatries that are committed within it. ‘ Babylon has said in her heart, I will ascend unto heaven ; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. . . . I will be like the Most High ! ’ And what is the Lord’s reply to this proud boasting ? Isaiah tells us, ‘ I will rise up against them, saith the Lord of hosts, and cut off from Babylon the name, and remnant, and son, and nephew, saith the Lord of hosts. ’ ”

Rhoda looked very grave and deeply impressed by these awful denunciations, and by the solemnity of her brother’s manner of repeating them. For a while she kept silence ; and Benaiah and Zipporah stood gazing out over the doomed city, and then looked far beyond its walls towards the far-away land of Judea, whither their hearts were so powerfully drawn.

Presently Rhoda looked up in her brother’s face, and tears were in her deep blue eyes as she pressed his hand, and said,—

“ Benaiah, I do not wonder now that you are so anxious to leave this city. If God has declared that He will destroy it, and make it so desolate, I should wish to go away from it at once. When will all those sad things come to pass, Benaiah ? ”

“ I cannot tell you, Rhoda. We know that this great city has already been conquered, both by Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede, and much of her glory and her strength was then taken away from her, but her utter destruction cannot take place until she has fully accomplished the purposes for which Jehovah has suffered her to be so greatly exalted. We believe that before the final fall of Babylon, her rulers will be made the instruments for the re-

storation of our people to their own land. We hoped that Artaxerxes might have been that blessed instrument; but the wars which he is now carrying on in other countries, and the reverses which have lately befallen his army in Greece, seem now to have destroyed those hopes; or, at all events, to have deferred them indefinitely. We must have patience, Rhoda, and faith also. We must wait the Lord's time; and believe that when that good time arrives He will surely bring to pass all that He has so graciously promised to His chosen land and His chosen people, by the mouth of His holy prophets. We may not live to see it—our bodily eyes may never behold the city of Jerusalem, or the beauteous land over which she once reigned so gloriously. But still we must hope, and pray, and strive for the prosperity of Judea. And, dear Rhoda, we must also endeavour so to live, that even if we end our days in captivity, we may hope to soar in the spirit to that heavenly Canaan, of which the land that was promised to Abraham and his seed was but a lowly type."

Earnestly Benaiah spoke, and earnestly both his sisters listened to him. To Zipporah such discourses and such lofty and animating themes were very familiar. But young Rhoda had seldom heard her brother thus describe the future fate of Babylon, or thus express his firm faith in the entire restoration of his race to the land of their fathers; and his words sank deep into her heart, and inspired her with somewhat of the same spirit which dwelt in him and in Zipporah also.

From that hour Rhoda no longer regarded Babylon as her *home*; she felt that she was a stranger in a strange land, and that Jerusalem was the only home to which she would henceforward look, and for which she would never cease to pray.

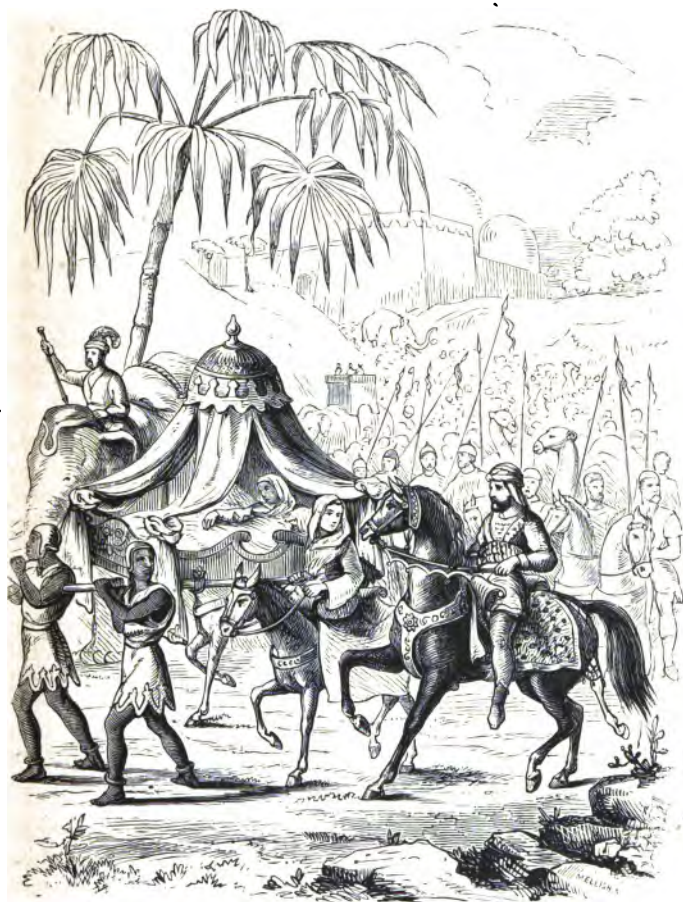
CHAPTER V.

THE streets of Suza were thronged with a gaping multitude of old and young, rich and poor—all arrayed in their most festive attire, and all eagerly watching the progress of a stately procession, as it traversed the capital of Susiana, towards the royal palace of Shushan.

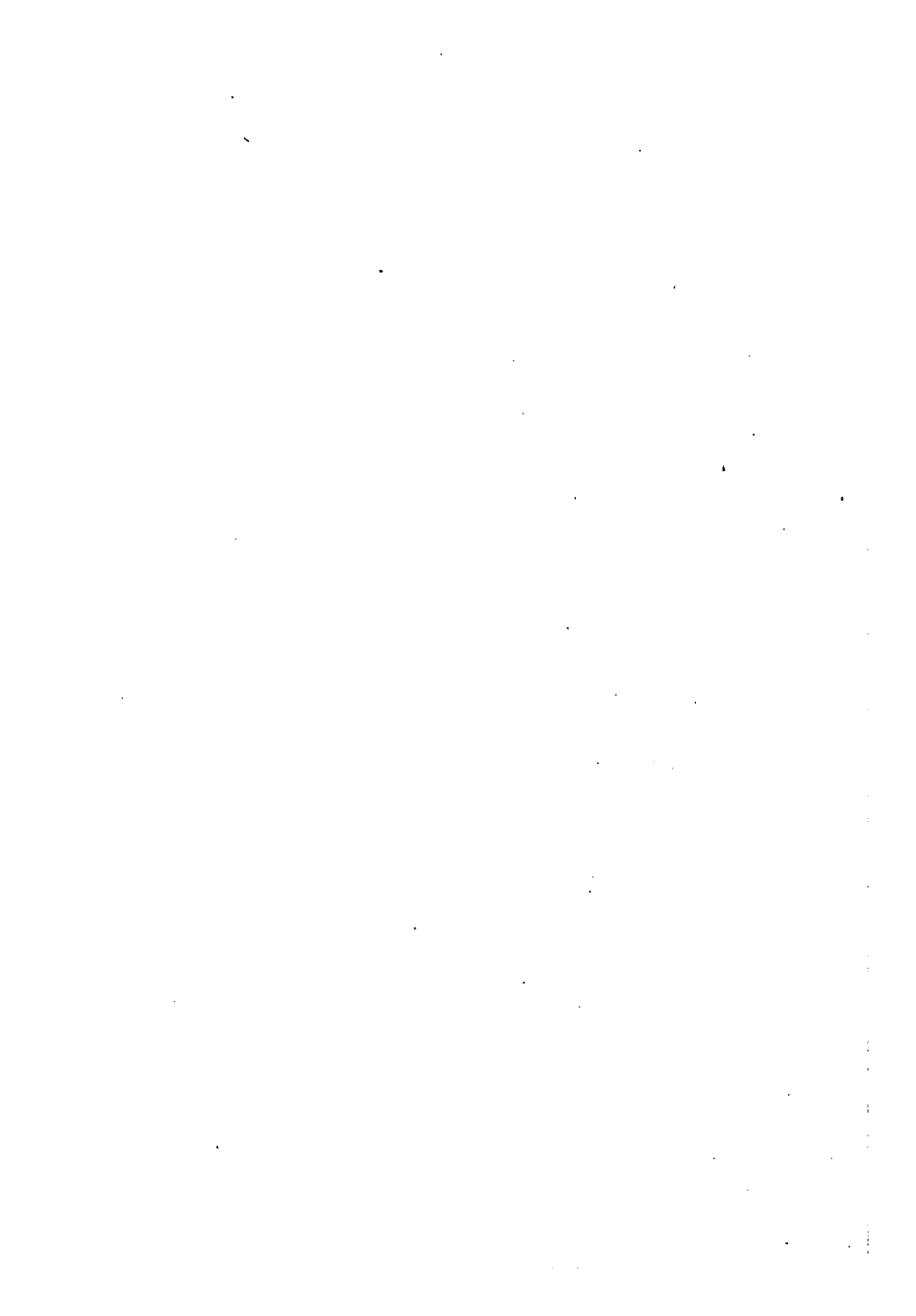
Several months had elapsed since the conversation took place between Benaiah and his sisters, which we related in the last chapter. The summer had passed away; and autumn, with its rich harvests of grain and fruit, was waning into winter. And now Artaxerxes was performing his annual migration, to spend the cold season in his favourite palace of Shushan.

How stately and dignified he looked as he rode along on his noble Arabian steed, decked in his royal apparel! The tiara which covered his head, his girdle, and the dagger which was attached to it, all glittered with costly gems; and the caparisons of his horse were richly adorned with gold and silver and precious stones. Behind him, and on either side, rode chief ministers of state, among whom were Hatach the Assyrian, and Nehemiah the Jewish cup-bearer.

Many guards, splendidly dressed and well mounted, attended the king and his immediate suite; and after them followed a long train of elephants, and camels, and horses, and asses, which conveyed the king's numerous family and their attendants, and also those of the great men who were honoured by a command to accompany their royal master to Suza. A mixed multitude came on in the rear of the procession, bringing up the baggage animals, which bore a goodly



And now Artaxerxes was performing his annual migration, to spend the cold season in his favourite Palace of Shushan. Page 22.



proportion to the train that preceded them, and showed that the King of Persia did not move from one royal residence to another without conveying with him all the luxuries and comforts to which he was accustomed.

Among the persons who composed the household of Hatach were Jasher and Benaiah, and also Abigail and her daughters. To Jasher was committed the charge of all his master's family and property, whether at Babylon or at Suza—whither the Assyrian nobleman always accompanied the king—and the Jew was faithful to the trust reposed in him. His son, Benaiah, shared the confidence of Hatach, and took part in all the business that devolved on Jasher; especially the care of the high-bred horses which formed a portion of Hatach's wealth, and were the objects of much pride and solicitude.

How well the young Jew looked as he rode by his father's side on a spirited horse which had lately been brought from Egypt, and which he managed with a grace and skill that Zipporah thought could not be excelled. She and Rhoda were mounted on white mules of great beauty—presents from Hatach—and they followed their father and brother; while Abigail was borne in a handsome litter, as were also several of the elder ladies of the court train.

Artaxerxes Longimanus was a good and benevolent monarch. His long reign was not disgraced by those acts of cruelty and oppression—we might almost say, of madness—which marked those of many of his predecessors; and his subjects loved and honoured him, and they rejoiced when he came to dwell among them. The homage which they paid was not an unwilling service; and it was well repaid by the smiles which he bestowed upon them as they bowed the knee, and bent before him during his royal progress. Soon he reached the palace gates, which were thrown wide open to receive him; and he entered the outer court, accompanied by those grandees who were immediately attached to the court, and by all the members of his own family. Then the gates were closed, and all the rest of the train dispersed to their own dwellings in the city, or the fortress of Suza.

The good king had worn a smile as he passed through the

admiring and obsequious crowd who had assembled to greet him; but his heart was heavy, and his spirit was sorely troubled. The reverses which had befallen his forces in Greece had been so serious as to compel him to listen to proposals for peace which were humbling to his pride, and such as he would, under other circumstances, have rejected with scorn. One of the conditions prescribed was that the maritime towns on the Syrian coast should be abandoned by the Persians, and that their army should in no case approach within three days' journey of the sea. This was a very galling stipulation, and Artaxerxes found it very hard to submit to such a serious restriction. In the council-hall of the palace of Shushan he deliberated frequently with his ministers and advisers as to the best mode of either evading or meeting the demands of his victorious enemies; and weeks and months passed in fruitless schemes and unavailing negotiations. The demands of the Grecians were not abated; and all that remained to Artaxerxes and his counsellors was to make such arrangements as might prevent their now prosperous rivals from taking an unfair advantage of the concessions which they began to fear were inevitable, and encroaching still further on the Persian territories.

For this purpose it was resolved that several frontier towns should be fortified, and put in a state of perfect defence; and we shall see, by-and-by, how this politic and prudential resolution was overruled and directed by Him who holds the hearts of men in His hands, and governs all their actions, to the furtherance of His own good purpose.

In the meantime life went on, as regarded the individuals in whom we take an especial interest, very much in the same manner at Suza as it had done at Babylon. The devout and patriotic among the Jewish exiles wept and mourned for the troubles of their brethren in Judea, and for the yet greater trials and afflictions which they feared would soon come upon them. The thoughtless and light-hearted joined in the festivities and amusements of the heathen among whom they dwelt; and some seemed even to forget the God of their fathers, and the land of their inheritance, and to be absorbed in trade and commerce, or in political and pecuniary schemes and negotiations.

Not so Jasher and his family. One abiding feeling dwelt in all their breasts—one fervent desire pervaded their lives, and animated their prayers: the desire of returning to Jerusalem, and sharing the perils of their brethren. And not so the faithful Nehemiah. His very soul was bound up in the fate of God's people and God's holy city; and no wealth, or rank, or dignity—not even the favour of the great king—could divert his mind from the one object for which he lived: the restoration of the Jews, as a people, to their own land.

With this object in view, Nehemiah highly prized his office of cup-bearer to Artaxerxes. It was an office of great dignity, and of much responsibility; for in the days of which we speak—and, indeed, in these our own days—the life of an Eastern despot was never safe from the machinations of his enemies, who were frequently his own relatives or dependants. It was therefore the duty of the royal cup-bearers to ascertain that the beverages which they presented to their master were pure and unadulterated by any poisonous mixture. A cup-bearer must be a friend, as well as the servant, of his master—he must possess his entire confidence; for if he were a traitor, who could prevent his compassing the death of the king? This office also gave great personal influence to those who held it, as it necessarily brought them constantly into the presence of the king; and this in his hours of privacy and relaxation, when he would be more disposed to listen to any suggestion or representation, than when he sat in state, surrounded by all his officers, and subject to the appeals of many suppliants for his favour.

It was for all these reasons that Nehemiah must have valued his office; and doubtless he watched and waited, day by day, for a fitting opportunity of bringing the cause of his brethren effectually before the king. That opportunity did not occur for some time after the removal of the court from Babylon to Suza; and the hearts of the faithful Jews began to sink, and their hopes became fainter and fainter, as weeks passed on, and no measures were taken for the relief of their brethren at Jerusalem.

CHAPTER VI.

THE severe losses which the Persian forces had sustained, both by sea and by land, in the Grecian war, had necessitated fresh levies being made, in order that reinforcements might be sent to the army, and the enemy be kept in check until the terms of peace were agreed on.

The king held a conference with his seven great counselors of state, without whose advice he never transacted any business of importance ; for the council was composed of the greatest men of the kingdom, who were well versed in the laws and the ancient customs of the realm.

One of this select number was Hatach ; and he was greatly esteemed by his royal master, who placed peculiar confidence in his judgment. His son Merodach also enjoyed the king's favour in a very high degree. He had from childhood been admitted to an intimacy with the royal princes, and had shared in the excellent education which the wise Artaxerxes Longimanus took care to secure to his sons.

From their earliest infancy the young princes were confided to the care of discreet and faithful men, who watched over their health, and superintended the conduct of the nurses who brought them up. The boys were early taught all athletic and manly exercises, especially riding, in which the Persians generally excelled ; and as their strength would permit, they were allowed to share in the favourite sport of hunting. When they attained the age of fourteen, and their intellectual powers were beginning to be developed, four of the wisest and most virtuous men in the state were selected as their preceptors. The first of these instructed the youths in

what they called "*magic*;" that is, in the worship of the gods, according to the doctrines of the celebrated Zoroaster, son of Oromasdes. He also taught them the elements of the laws, and of the Persian mode of government. The second preceptor was especially charged to watch over the moral habits of his pupils—to teach them to speak the truth, and to act with justice towards their dependants. The third was to regulate their mode of life, and to take care that they were not led astray by a love of pleasure and luxury. And the fourth had the task of imbuing the young princes with such manly courage, and superiority to all feeling of fear or timidity, as should fit them to fulfil whatever duties might hereafter devolve upon them—whether the guidance of a kingdom, the government of a province, or the command of an army.

Some of the numerous sons of Artaxerxes were now of an age to undertake some of these duties. The eldest, as heir to the throne, was not permitted to join the army; but a younger brother was appointed to lead the reinforcements, and convey his father's orders to the general who commanded the troops. Many young noblemen volunteered to accompany him, and Merodach was among the first of these. His offer was gladly accepted by the prince, who entertained a personal friendship for him, and appointed him to a position of trust near his own person.

No time was to be lost, and Merodach's preparations were soon completed. He took leave of his father, and of his sister Zebina—his mother had died in his childhood—and he joined the new band of soldiers. It was a great grief to Zebina to part with her only brother, and no hope of fame or of favour which he might acquire in this expedition could console her. Sadly she helped to array him in his gorgeous military attire of gold and purple, for which the simple dress of the Persian soldiers, in the early part of Cyrus's reign, had been exchanged by that monarch in his later years. Still more sadly she clasped around him his ornamented belt, and hung in it his jewelled dagger, and handed to him the javelin, and the bow, and the arrows, which were to be his weapons in the coming warfare.

Merodach was the pride and delight of his sister, and often

had she dilated on his merits as a son and as a brother to her friend Zipporah, who always in return extolled the virtues and the talents of Benaiah, and claimed for him a superiority over all who might be compared with him.

This amicable contest united the young girls in a closer friendship; and after the departure of Merodach, Zebina became a more frequent visitor at the simple home of Jasher and Abigail, and more often induced Zipporah to be her guest in the rich and highly decorated dwelling of Hatach, over which she presided as mistress. This does not imply that Zebina had any control over the whole of her father's household. The domestic customs of the ancient Persians appear to have been similar to those of their modern descendants, and to have deprived their women, at least those of the higher class, of that liberty and independence of action which is now enjoyed in the civilized nations of Europe.

Zebina's authority was confined to the women's apartments, and the numerous servants and slaves who belonged to them. Her mother had been Hatach's favourite wife, and the only one who had borne him a son. She had reigned supreme over the female establishment, and her authority had descended to her daughter. In a litter, or closely veiled, either on foot or on horseback, Zebina could go where she pleased, and visit whom she would; but always attended by a guard. The Jewish exiles were not governed by such strict rules; but their manners were naturally greatly assimilated to those of their conquerors, and the women lived very secluded lives, and enjoyed very little male society, except that of their husbands or nearest relatives. In their own homes, or in the apartments of their Persian friends, they occupied themselves either in household work or in embroidery—an art in which they greatly excelled; and the brilliance of the colours of the various fabrics which they employed has been celebrated in Holy Writ. Scarlet and blue and purple, adorned with a mixture of gold and silver, were the hues of which we have this record; and ancient historians tell us much of the gorgeous dresses and trappings in which all the known Eastern nations indulged.

Music was also a favourite amusement, and much cultivated among the Persians, as it had always been among the

Jews. In this delightful art both Zipporah and her friend Zebina excelled; and often were their sweet voices heard in concert, as they sat in the apartments of the Assyrian maid, and accompanied their songs with the sound of the lyre.

Hatach was sometimes present on these occasions; for he loved his daughter's society, and often sought it when he returned weary from his attendance at the palace or at the hall of council. His presence did not banish Zipporah and her sister, who always accompanied her, from the apartments of her friend; for they were virtually members of his own household, being the daughters of his Jewish dependant, Jasher. As such, they had always been treated by Hatach with kindness and consideration, and encouraged to come to his dwelling. Benaiah, their brother, was also a great favourite with his master; and often in his heart had Hatach lamented that the noble-minded young Jew was not of his own race and nation, that he might have united him to his own family by still closer ties. He knew of no one whom he would so readily have made his son-in-law; but how could a Jew wed a disciple of Zoroaster? Such things had been done, and God's people had united themselves to the heathen, both in the land of their captivity and in Judea; but the son of Jasher was not likely so far to forget the laws of his God and the principles in which he had been brought up. Still Hatach cherished the idea in his own mind, and it led him to promote still more the friendly intercourse between Zebina and the daughters of Jasher. He knew that the Jew was of noble birth—that he was indeed of the royal lineage of Judah—and he did not despise him because he was his own dependant, and of the conquered and exiled race.

Of course Zebina knew very little of the man whom her father would fain have made her husband. She had seen him frequently; for he was accustomed to visit Hatach's dwelling very constantly, and was an important member of his large establishment. But Zebina had never held any intercourse with the young Jew, and all that she knew of his character and disposition was derived from the partial account that she heard from his sisters.

Hatach was not, however, checked in his favourite scheme

by any doubts as to his daughter's willingness to perform her part in its accomplishment; for he never thought of consulting her wishes on the subject. Had he been able to get over the difficulty of Benaiah's religion, he would have offered him his daughter as he would have offered him any other article which he possessed, and would have made every arrangement for his daughter's marriage as he would have done for her removal from his dwelling at Suza to that at Babylon.

The object of all his plans and cogitations was, happily, quite unconscious of them. She listened to Zipporah's praises of her brother with as much indifference as the Jewish maiden did to those which she lavished on Merodach; and neither of the young girls gave themselves any concern as to their future lot in life, which they regarded as altogether a matter for the consideration and final decision of their parents, and not one for their private discussion. Much more frequently did they speculate on the future, as it involved the possible return of the Jewish exiles, in a body, to their own land. On this subject Zipporah often poured forth her feelings—her hopes and anticipations—into the ear of her friend; and Zebina sympathised in those feelings and those hopes, although she dreaded their accomplishment on her own account. The departure of Zipporah would be to her the loss of her chosen and confidential friend—one of whom she felt that she could not supply the place from among her own countrywomen. Zipporah and little Rhoda were to her as sisters; and their mother, Abigail, had often been as a mother to her since she had been deprived of her own. Could she then feel unmixed pleasure when her friend dilated on the glories and the delights of her beloved Judea, and her undying hope of yet beholding it? Could she rejoice when Zipporah repeated to her all that Benaiah had said of Nehemiah's unshaken faith in the speedy accomplishment of God's promises to His people, in which the ardent young Jewess so cordially shared? No; Zebina was of another spirit. She loved her friend, and she admired her devotion to her God and her country. But she could not quite comprehend her desire to leave the comforts, and the luxuries, and the tranquillity which she enjoyed in the

land of her birth—the only land that she had ever beheld—and to go forth to an unknown country, and an untried life, and encounter all the dangers and difficulties and privations to which she owed her countrymen were there subjected.



CHAPTER VII.



HO was it that came galloping so swiftly and so steadily across the wide plain that extended to the north-west of Suza? He was hidden from the eyes of the inhabitants by the groves and gardens that surrounded the city; but he bore on his way with unfaltering speed, and his good horse carried him as well as when he started from the last post-house several hours before. The rider was one of the couriers or letter-carriers, who in ancient days supplied the place of all our complicated postal arrangements, though perhaps not quite so satisfactorily.

This courier brought despatches from Jerusalem; and he had ridden far and fast. He had changed his horse at each of the stages provided by government, where a relay of horses was kept for this purpose; but he had never resigned the documents which he carried into any other hands. These documents were various—some were public, and addressed to members of the government, and some were private letters from certain of the Jews at Jerusalem to their friends or relatives at Suza.

The courier entered the city gates, and he never drew his bridle until he rode, full speed, into the courtyard of Hatach's dwelling, and checked his steed at the handsome carved doorway of the spacious mansion. He was taken immediately into the presence of the great man, and delivered to him—as one of the councillors of state—the despatches that were intended for the government. He then remounted, and proceeded to the house of Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah, with a private letter which had been addressed to him by one of his friends, then employed at Jerusalem under Ezra, the governor.

That evening, towards sunset, Nehemiah was walking to-and-fro in the garden of the palace of Shushan, and musing on the condition of his countrymen in Judea—a subject that was seldom absent from his thoughts—when he saw his brother Hanani and a Jewish stranger approaching him from beneath the marble colonnade that surrounded the garden, and gave access to it both from the apartments of the palace and from the streets of the city.

Hanani bore a letter in his hand, and his countenance was unusually marked by care and anxiety. He approached his brother, and gave him the letter, saying,—

“Read this, Nehemiah, and see the state of our brethren at Jerusalem. Their condition is becoming worse and worse from day to day, and I fear all hope of relief is gone. Even your faith and confidence must fail when you have read this account which my friend Hushai has sent by the courier from the holy city. Jacob will himself confirm all that Hushai relates, for he has been an eye-witness of the sufferings of the Jews, and he has shared in them during his residence at Jerusalem.”

Nehemiah took the letter, and perused it very carefully and thoughtfully. Then he said,—

“I would that the king could read this letter. It might move him to send help to our brethren. Hanani, I do not despair.”

“Can you not read it to him, my brother? Can you not plead the cause of our oppressed and persecuted race?” exclaimed Hanani, eagerly. “Surely he would listen to you, Nehemiah.”

“Alas, my brother,” replied the cup-bearer, “do you forget the rules and customs of the Persian court so entirely as to suppose that I could intrude this subject on the king unbidden by him; or that I should further the cause of our afflicted people by so doing? No, Hanani; I must wait until Artaxerxes himself opens the way, and gives me an opportunity to plead for our brethren in Judea. Were I to do otherwise I might lose my office and possibly my life, and never be permitted to attempt what my soul is so earnestly bent on accomplishing.”

“This is very discouraging,” observed Hanani, thought-

fully; "But you are the best judge as to the most fitting time and manner of speaking to the king. I well know your zeal and courage, and I am assured that you will lose no proper occasion. But, Nehemiah, the case is becoming very urgent. Hear what Jacob will tell you concerning the remnant of our people who were left in Judea, as well as of those who returned thither with Ezra."

"O my Lord," said the Jewish courier; "the state of our brethren in the beloved land is sad indeed! The remnant who were left of the captivity, and remain in the province of Judea, are in great affliction and reproach. The wall, which the Chaldeans broke down, and the gates, which they burned with fire, have never been restored. The temple, indeed, has been rebuilt, in such a manner as the poverty and weakness of our brethren would permit; and many humble dwellings have been erected. But what avails this, so long as the city lies defenceless, and her inhabitants are subject to the continual attacks of the Ammonites, and the Horonites, and the Arabians, who dwell in the surrounding country; and who are all the enemies of our brethren, and have conspired together for their ruin? They look with jealous eyes on the partial restoration of the Jews to their own land; and fear lest that part of our rightful inheritance, which they now occupy, should be wrested from them. Therefore do they make false representations to the Persian governors of the province, and use every means in their power to make them the adversaries of the Jews. In this evil purpose they have had great success; and the cruelty and oppression that are exercised against the Lord's people are far greater than anything that their brethren, dwelling here in peace, have conceived of."

Nehemiah listened to this narration with deep and earnest attention. The feelings which it aroused in his ardent spirit were clearly depicted on his fine expressive countenance, but he kept silence until Jacob had ceased speaking. Then, in a voice of much emotion, he questioned him on many points, and drew from him many sad particulars of the sufferings which he had recently witnessed in Jerusalem.

The account aroused in the patriotic Jew the most profound grief, and the strongest feelings of indignation. Gladly

would he have rushed unbidden into the king's presence, and have cried for justice to his countrymen, and a righteous retribution on their oppressors. Willingly would he have braved the consequences of such a daring act, had only his own personal safety been at stake, and he could have hoped to benefit his brethren. But it was not so. Any such rash procedure—which would so greatly have outraged all the strict requirements of the Persian court—would not only have endangered his own liberty and life, but it would also most probably have made shipwreck of all his hopes of ever doing good to his afflicted countrymen.

What could Nehemiah do, and to whom could he turn in this great strait? Only to Him who *ruleth the spirit of princes*, and makes all things subservient to His own good purposes!

Well used was Nehemiah to seek the help of God, and to trust in Him alone in all his trials and difficulties; and his faith and confidence did not fail him now. Nevertheless, his grief overpowered his strength; and he sat down and wept, and mourned after the manner of the Easterns; and Hanani and Jacob mourned with him.

Then he arose, and went to his house; and there he fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. And he said,—

“I beseech Thee, O Lord God of Heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him, and observe His commandments; let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel, Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against Thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses.

“Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring

them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.

"Now these are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power, and by Thy strong hand.

"O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant, and to the prayer of Thy servants who desire to fear Thy name: and prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Then Nehemiah, the king's cup-bearer, felt strengthened to wait the Lord's time, knowing well that it would be the best time; and that He would cause all events and circumstances to work together for good to those who put their trust in Him.



CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was grief in the dwelling of Hatach. The wail of the mourners was heard in the gates. Zebina wept in the seclusion of her own inner chamber; and Hatach sat, gloomy and desponding, on his divan, while his friends stood around him in silence; for what comfort could they give him—what could these heathens say which could carry consolation to the heart of a bereaved father?

Merodach was dead. Hatach's only son had fallen in a recent skirmish between the Persians and the Grecians, and all his father's hopes, and all his ambitious schemes for that son's future were destroyed for ever!

For many days the noble Assyrian wept and fasted—yes, he wept and fasted, even as the Jewish cup-bearer had done. But he did not, like Nehemiah, cast all his care upon the Lord his God, and look to Him for support and comfort. He did not, like Nehemiah, confess the sins by which he had justly incurred the anger of the Lord, and deserved His chastisements.

No; Hatach knew nothing of the peace which God's true servants, in every age and in every country, have found in the knowledge that "*He doeth all things well,*" and therefore he was inconsolable in his great affliction.

After a time he took refuge in the maxims of philosophy; and began to meditate on the best mode of supplying the loss which he had sustained, and of filling up the gap which death had made in his family circle. Again the son of Jasher recurred to his mind; and again the strong desire which he had long ago conceived, of uniting Benaiah to himself by

ties closer than those either of dependence or of friendship, returned forcibly to his depressed spirit.

It is true that Hatach had never ventured to express this desire either to Benaiah or his father, for he well knew the attachment of the Jews to their own religion and their own land; and he was also aware that both Jasher and his son only awaited his death, or his willing consent to their leaving his service, to follow their brethren to Jerusalem. But Hatach did not believe that this love for their God and their country could prove stronger than the temptation which now it was in his power to offer. His son—the heir to all his wealth, and all his rank—was dead; and it rested with him to adopt another in his place, after the manner in many Asiatic nations, and to endow him with all the privileges which would have belonged to Merodach. On whom could he so well bestow those privileges as on Benaiah; and who could so worthily represent his lost son, or so well console Zebina for her brother's early death, as the handsome and high-minded young Jew.

Hatach had indeed some slight misgivings as to Jasher's willingness to consent to the desired arrangement. But he hoped to be able to overcome all his scruples; and he felt no doubt of Benaiah's readiness to accept his lovely daughter as his wife, notwithstanding her devotion to the deities of Persia; and to relinquish all idea of following his countrymen to Judea for the sake of the rich inheritance which he was prepared to offer him.

Hatach, however, reasoned of things which were far above, out of his sight. He carried his heathen ideas and principles into his calculations as to the actions of God's servants; and he was necessarily disappointed, as we shall see.

When Hatach emerged from the retirement to which he had condemned himself, and which only a few chosen friends had dared to intrude upon, he repaired to the apartment of his daughter. Zebina had also passed the first days of mourning in utter seclusion; and only her own female attendants, and her young Jewish friend, Zipporah, had seen her.

Zipporah was seated by her side, on the low divan which

ran along the side of the room, and supplied the place of chairs and couches. She had wept with her friend, and sympathized in her deep grief for the loss of her only brother; and then she had endeavoured to lead her thoughts from earth to heaven, and to cheer her with the hope of a future life of happiness, where she might again meet her beloved Merodach.

To all that the young Jewess said, Zebina listened attentively and thoughtfully. The daughter of Hatach was not an *idolater* in the sense which we usually attach to the word. She had been brought up in the Magian religion, which was generally held throughout Persia; and she therefore paid divine reverence to the element of fire, as being the most perfect symbol of the Deity. But, as a follower of the doctrines of Zoroaster, she did not regard the sun as a divinity, neither did she worship any images: indeed, such things were held by the Magi in utter abhorrence; and this point formed the marked distinction between them and the rival sect of Sabians.

The chief doctrine of the elder Zoroaster was the existence of two principles; one being the origin of all good, and the other of all evil. The former, named *Ormuzd*, was represented by light, on account of its purity and brightness and activity; while the latter, named *Ahriman*, was represented by darkness, as the most suitable emblem of evil.

The second Zoroaster, who lived in the time of Darius, effected some reform in the Magian religion; which, since the death of Smerdis—who was a disciple of the former teacher of that name—had fallen into some disrepute.

The principal doctrine which the reformer introduced was a very important one; for, whereas his predecessor taught, as a fundamental truth, the existence of two supreme intelligences, who maintained a continual conflict, and divided the government of the universe; the second Zoroaster introduced a principle, or deity, superior to both. He taught his followers to believe in *one supreme God*, who created light and darkness; and who, out of these two elements, made all other things according to His own will.

He further taught that there were two angels, inferior to the Supreme Being: one the angel of light, and the author

of good ; the other, the angel of darkness, and the author of evil ; that a perpetual struggle goes on between these two beings, and will continue until the end of the world, when there will be a general resurrection and a final judgment ; and that then the angel of light and his followers will be taken to a world of happiness and purity, to receive an everlasting reward ; while the angel of darkness, and those who have served him, will be driven away to a state of eternal darkness and misery.

Such is, to this day, the religion of the Persian Magi ; and it is hardly necessary to point out to our young readers, that these doctrines are very similar to those of the Holy Scriptures. It seems more than probable that both the Zoroasters were acquainted with the sacred writings, as they then existed, for the first of them dwelt in Syria, where the Israelites had long settled ; and the second at Babylon, to which place the Jews had been carried captive, and where the Persian teacher might even have conversed with the prophet Daniel himself.

From what has been thus briefly stated of the religion in which Zebina had been educated, it will readily be understood that she and Zipporah had many ideas in common ; and that they could converse on many serious subjects without offending each other's prejudices.

At the same time there was a very important distinction between the degrees of faith which dwelt in the souls of these two maidens. Zebina did indeed acknowledge one Supreme Being as the Creator of all things, and the final judge of all men : but she did not, like Zipporah, regard Him as the ruler and disposer of all events, and the king and father of His own believing people. She did not look to Him as *her own* God and father—as *her own* protector and guide. She did not pray to Him in trouble, and trust to Him in difficulty, and depend on Him to over-rule all events for good to His servants that served Him. Therefore she did not find peace and consolation in her religion ; and, therefore, when affliction fell upon her she was crushed by the blow, and knew not where to look for strength or comfort.

Then it was that Zipporah tried to lead her friend to

higher views, and brighter hopes, and a more confiding faith in the God of the universe—in Him who had shown Himself so especially the God of Israel.

Zebina could not receive and apply to herself all that Zipporah urged so eloquently and so earnestly. She could not relinquish the errors which had been so intimately connected with the truths that had been taught her. But she loved the Jewish maid, and she admired her zeal and enthusiasm; and she felt the weight of her sorrow somewhat lightened while she listened to the words of inspiration, and the Divine promises, as recorded by Moses and the prophets.

Hatach entered his daughter's apartment, which was furnished with every comfort and luxury that wealth and affection could provide, and he marvelled to see the expression of calmness and serenity which now dwelt on her countenance. When first the news of Merodach's untimely death had reached his home, and Hatach had borne the sad tidings to Zebina, her passionate grief had alarmed and overpowered him. He found himself utterly unable to comfort her; and therefore he left her to the indulgence of her sorrow in the society of her women, and he shut himself up in his own suite of rooms.

Now his mind was full of that scheme of which we have already spoken, and he longed to commence some negotiations for its accomplishment. He had fully made up his mind to speak to Jasher on the subject, before he made known to Benaiah the honour and happiness which he designed for him; but before taking that step he wished to ascertain Zebina's state of mind, and to judge whether her grief had sufficiently subsided to allow of his proceeding in an affair so deeply interesting to her.

He was, therefore, very agreeably surprised to see the quiet composure of her manner, as she rose from the embroidered cushions on which she was reclining, and advanced to meet him.

Hatach did not question his daughter as to the cause of the change. He knew that Zipporah was her favourite companion, and he rejoiced in her partiality for the sister of Benaiah, which would, he hoped, render the proposed

connexion more agreeable to her. He did not revert to the affliction which had recently befallen them—he did not mention the name of Merodach; but he artfully led Zipporah to speak of her brother; and he readily drew from her those praises which she was always ready to accord, and which he desired that Zebina should hear and appreciate.

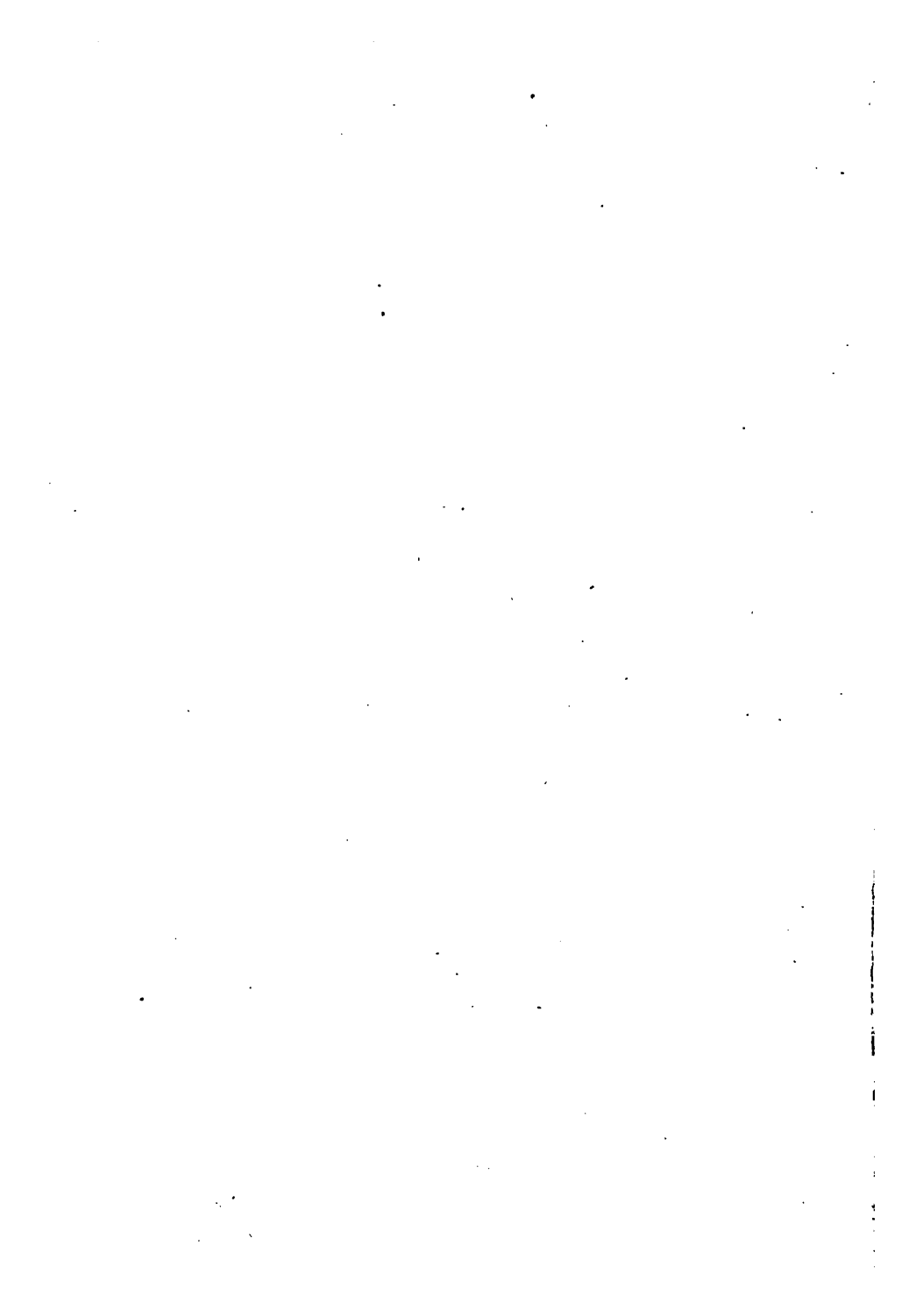
Zipporah had learnt to feel quite at her ease with the father of her friend; and she went on from speaking of Benaiah's good and manly qualities, to expatiate on his ardent desire to go to Jerusalem, and assist in the great and holy work of rebuilding the city. She dwelt feelingly on all the sufferings of her countrymen, which had lately been reported to Hanani, and by him communicated to his brother at Susa. She expressed her own lively hopes and anticipations for the future. And, growing bolder as she proceeded, she at length ventured to implore the aid of Hatach, and besought him to intercede with his royal master for the defence of the Jews against their enemies and oppressors.

Hatach was interested in her appeal, and he would have promised to use his influence in the way she desired; but the departure of Benaiah and his family was an event which he was by no means prepared to assist in, or to sanction. He had no objection to the king sending aid to Jerusalem; but he had a very great objection to his ordering the release of Jasher in his family, and their restoration to their own land. He therefore resolved to lose no time in carrying out his own private scheme, which he hoped would effectually bind his Jewish dependents to himself; or, at all events, would detain Benaiah as an inmate of his home, and a member of his family.





Now it came to pass that when the King called for wine, Nehemiah took up the golden cup, and presented it to him. Page 42.



CHAPTER IX.

FOUR months had elapsed since the arrival of the couriers from Jerusalem with the sad report of the state of the Jews in the city and neighbourhood. That was in the month Chislev, which corresponded to the latter part of November, and earlier part of December. It was now the month Nisan, answering to our April and May, and Suza looked bright and gay in the verdure and blossom of spring. The gardens of Shusan and the palace were in all their beauty. Parterres of many-coloured flowers were disposed around the inner court, or private garden; and in the centre was a cool fountain, enclosed in a marble basin. Around the court was an open colonnade, with pillars of rich and varied marbles, and from these pillars were suspended white and green and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to rings of solid silver. The pavement of the colonnade was of party-coloured marbles—red and blue and white and black—inlaid in curious patterns, and on this brilliant floor were placed several low couches of gold and silver, well provided with rich embroidered cushions.

On one of these sat, or rather reclined, king Artaxerxes; and by his side the queen was seated. Only a few of the attendants were present, and the royal pair were partaking of their evening meal.

It so happened that Nehemiah was at that time in waiting on his royal master, and serving him as cup-bearer. No such opportunity as the present had occurred for several months. Nehemiah had not been thus in private with the king since his heart had been so greatly saddened by the

news from Judea ; and the care which oppressed his spirit had not been observed by Artaxerxes.

Now it came to pass, that when the king called for wine, Nehemiah took up the golden cup, and presented it to him. As he did so, Artaxerxes looked him in the face very earnestly, and he said to him,—

“Nehemiah, why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? This sadness can be nothing but sorrow of heart. You have some heavy care on your mind, and you have not told it to me.”

Artaxerxes was a kind master. This very remark proved it ; for otherwise how should he have shown so much solicitude for his cup-bearer? Nevertheless, such was the extraordinary reverence which was then exacted by all sovereigns from their subjects, that it was always a hazardous affair to address them on any personal or irrelevant matters. Therefore, Nehemiah was very sore afraid.

This faithful and true-hearted Jew had long ago resolved to bring the cause of his people before the king, but he desired to do so in such a manner as would not displease Artaxerxes, and thereby defeat his own object. He was sore afraid, and no wonder, for he served a despotic monarch ; and he filled an office of such high responsibility, that the slightest suspicion of deceit, or even any hesitation on his part, might have led to his instant execution.

It must have been with an anxious heart that he replied in the language of an Eastern courtier,—

“Let the king live for ever! Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?”

It was wise of Nehemiah to allude to the desecration of his fathers’ sepulchres ; for by so doing he touched a sensitive chord in the breast of the king. A respect for the graves of their forefathers has ever marked the Eastern nations, and has even given them an object to swear by, as being so sacred.

Possibly this appeal of his cup-bearer moved the King to pity, for he said in reply,—

“For what dost thou make request?”

This was a wide and unexpected opening for Nehemiah, and it must have filled his heart with hope and confidence, and his spirit must have been greatly exercised with regard to the petition that he should make.

He did not, however, forget, in his eagerness and agitation, that there was One greater than Artaxerxes to whom he should first apply. He paused before he answered the king's gracious inquiry, and he *prayed to the God of heaven*.

This was the secret of Nehemiah's dauntless faith and unwavering confidence! In all difficulties, and in all dangers, *he prayed to the God of heaven*; and then he set himself vigorously to the work in hand. Therefore, he prospered in his undertakings.

Having thus asked guidance and strength where only it could be obtained, the heroic Jew replied to his master,—

"If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, my request is, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it."

This was a bold request; for the cup-bearer well knew how highly the king valued his services, and how unwilling he would be to part with him. But he trusted to the God of heaven to incline the heart of Artaxerxes towards his petition, and he was not disappointed.

There is reason to believe that the queen was favourably disposed towards the Jews, and that she joined her supplications to those of Nehemiah. Certain it is, that by some means the heart of the king was moved; for he listened graciously to the request of his cup-bearer, and consented to all that he desired. He did not even oppose his going himself to Jerusalem, but he only asked,—

"For how long shall thy journey be? And when wilt thou return?"

So Nehemiah's spirit was rejoiced, and he fixed a time when he would return to his master.

Then he said unto the king,—

"If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; and a letter unto Asaph, the keeper of

the king's forest, that he may give me beams for the gate of the palace which appertain to the house of the Lord, and for the wall, and for the house that I shall dwell in."

And Artaxerxes granted him all that he desired, and he went forth from his presence to tell of his success to his brethren, and to commence immediate preparations for the journey.

Well did Nehemiah know who it was that had made his suit to prosper, and he failed not to acknowledge "*the good hand of his God*" in all that had come to pass.

He hastened to the dwelling of his brother Hanani, and there he found their mutual friend, Jasher, who had come to communicate to Hanani the proposals which Hatach had that very day made to him with regard to the marriage of Benaiah to his daughter.

Jasher was much moved, and he was speaking with such passionate earnestness when Nehemiah entered, that the latter did not attempt to interrupt him, but stood by much interested in all that was said by the faithful and indignant Jew.

"Hear me, Hanani! Hear me, Nehemiah!" he exclaimed. "He wanted to buy my son—my noble Benaiah. He offered his daughter and his wealth as the purchase of all our hopes of freedom and restoration to our beloved inheritance. And when with all the calmness that I could command, and all the respect that I felt due to him, I refused his offers as regarded myself, he tried to persuade me to use my authority and influence with Benaiah to induce him to become his son-in-law, and to remain in Persia even if I and the rest of my family should ever return to Judea!"

"And what was your reply?" said Hanani; "I know it was worthy of yourself and of your son."

"I think I smiled at the proposal," replied Jasher—and again a smile of contempt passed over his fine features; "I think I smiled at the idea of his knowing so little of Benaiah or of me as that he could venture on such proposals, or dream that either of us would listen to them. But I saw that he felt confident of being able to shake my son's resolution, and I was willing that he should make

the attempt. I was willing that he should prove my true-hearted Benaiah, so I said, 'He shall choose for himself, my lord Hatach. He shall decide whether he will be your son-in-law, and share all your power and wealth and dignity, and make up his mind to live and die an exile, or whether he will still remain your servant and cherish the hope of one day being permitted by you and the king to return, with all our brethren, to dwell in freedom at Jerusalem.' Hatach seemed well pleased at my reply. He looks on me as a wild visionary, who mars his present happiness by vain hopes that can never be realized, and he cannot believe that one so young as Benaiah will share my feelings, and be willing to resign so much that is desirable for prospects that seem so distant, and hopes that have so long deceived us."



while yet in ignorance of the bright hopes that have arisen for our race, and he will be doubly thankful that no prospects of wealth, or pleasure, or power, had led him out of the plain path of duty, or induced him to forget God's promises to Zion."

"You speak confidently, Jasher," said Hanani. "Have you no fears that the young man may have been led to listen to the voice of the tempter?"

"I have none!" exclaimed Jasher, almost angrily. "I know Benaiah's spirit, and I know his firmness of purpose. As soon could I suspect the holy and wise Nehemiah of deserting the cause of God's people, as suppose that my brave son would prove faithless and wed the daughter of a stranger to our God and our country. No, Hanani—Benaiah will not consent: and if Hatach and the king forbid our following our leader to Judea, we must abide here as exiles, and pray for the prosperity of our more fortunate brethren. We may be compelled to remain as captives, but we will never willingly cast in our lot with our heathen conquerors!"

"The Lord will open a way for you, Jasher," said Nehemiah. "He will surely incline the heart of Hatach as He has done that of the king; and you and your brave son will go with me to Jerusalem."

"How your faith puts us to shame!" said Jasher. "Even when all things seemed to be against us, and our weaker spirits failed, you yet maintained the same unshaken confidence that the Lord would hear your prayers. He has done so; and thus are we encouraged to call upon Him in all our difficulties. I will put this matter into His hands, and I will try to follow your example, Nehemiah, and to feel sure that all will be well."

The friends then separated; and Nehemiah and his brother proceeded to consult with the elders of the Jews, on all the various arrangements which must necessarily be made before they could set out on their long journey. The first point which they had to consider was the number of persons who should accompany them to Judea, and the expenses which would be incurred in many ways. The greater proportion of the Jewish exiles in Persia were nominally free,

and were regarded rather as settlers than as captives. They were engaged in trade and commerce, and they had formed connexions of different kinds with their conquerors. In many of these—as might be expected—the spirit of patriotism had died out; and in some the zeal for God's honour and glory, which all Jews professed, had become a name and not a reality. It consequently followed, that some of the more prosperous of the sons of Israel did not care to leave their homes and their adopted country, and to go forth to encounter troubles and dangers and privations. But there were many others who were of a better spirit, and who were willing to sacrifice their present comfort in the hope of freedom and independence. And there were others who, like Jasher, were still held in bondage—more or less irksome—and who sighed for deliverance, and were ready to face any perils or privations, if only they could obtain their liberty.

With these individuals Nehemiah and his friends deeply sympathized; and they took active and immediate measures to raise a fund sufficient to redeem all who were able and willing to undertake the journey. Many were thus eventually liberated, and were restored to their own land; either accompanying Nehemiah, or following him afterwards as they found opportunity.

While the cup-bearer and his companions were engaged in such arrangements, Jasher returned to his home; where he heard from his wife that Benaiah had been sent for by Hatach, and had not yet returned.

Jasher made no reply; but Abigail looked in his face, and she saw that he was troubled and anxious.

"What has befallen you, my husband?" she asked. "You look as if you had some great news to communicate; and yet I fear it is not all joyous news."

"You are right, Abigail, I have great and glorious news to tell you. The king has granted to Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem, and rebuild its walls."

"God be praised!" exclaimed Abigail, "and may He grant to Nehemiah wisdom and strength to carry on the work more successfully than Ezra has been able to do. With such news as this, why does any sadness cloud your brow, Jasher?"

“ Because, while I rejoice in the prospects that the Lord has opened for our people, I dread that I and my family may not be permitted to see and to share their happiness. I fear that Hatach will not be willing to release us. I know that he has set his mind on keeping Benaiah near him for life; and—even if he would permit it—I could not go away to freedom, and leave my son in bondage.”

“ O no, Jasher!” exclaimed Abigail eagerly, “ we could never leave Benaiah here alone! But why does Hatach so greatly desire to detain him?”

Then Jasher told his wife all that had occurred between himself and Hatach; and also for what purpose Benaiah had been summoned to his master's presence.

Abigail shared her husband's confidence in the firmness of their son's principles; but she also shared his anxiety as to the effect which that firmness might have on Hatach. Long they talked on the interesting subject, and earnestly they prayed that God would direct them and Benaiah aright, and cause all things to work for their real good.



CHAPTER XI.

ASHER and Abigail waited for Benaiah's return with much anxiety. Zipporah and Rhoda had gone to the apartments of Zebina, and they knew of neither of the events which had caused their parents so much thankfulness, and also so much apprehension.

After a time Jasher, at Abigail's request, went to Hatach's dwelling, in the hope of pacifying the wrath which they feared would be excited in his breast towards their son.

As Jasher entered the inner court, into which the apartments of Hatach opened, he saw the great man reclining on a low divan beneath the shade of a portico. He had raised himself upon his elbow, and was looking up, fixedly and sternly, into the face of Benaiah, who stood before him. The young man's face was turned from his father's; but Jasher could discern both respect and determination in his attitude, and also in the tone of his voice.

As he approached he heard him say, "My lord, I have no other reply to make. Your kindness, and the confidence which you place in me, will never pass from my memory and my heart. But I owe even more to my God; and to Him and His cause I must be true, even unto death."

Proud was Jasher to hear these words from the lips of his son; and a smile almost of triumph was visible on his countenance as Hatach turned his eyes from Benaiah to fix them on the new-comer.

Those eyes wore an expression rather of sorrow than of anger. Hatach could not but respect the firm disinterestedness of his young bondman's conduct. He could not but admire his zeal and devotion for his country and his God. And although he had tried every argument, and used every

mode of persuasion, and urged every possible form of temptation, to induce him to yield to his wishes, he yet felt how much more worthy he had proved himself of his esteem and affection by rejecting all his offers than he would have done if he had accepted them.

He beckoned to Jasher to approach, and then he said,—
“Your son has proved true to all your teaching, Jasher. He has followed your example, and he has chosen poverty and dependence, rather than wealth and liberty and power. I grieve for his and your decision on my own account as well as yours; for I wished to exalt you, and to make you my friends and my equals instead of my bondmen. But I see that nothing will now shake your resolution, and I must seek elsewhere for a son to replace my lost Merodach.”

There was something touching in Hatach's tone and manner that went to the heart of Jasher. He could feel for one who was suddenly deprived of his only son, to whom he had looked as the joy and the support of his declining years; and he could well understand that he regarded Benaiah as a worthy substitute for his young Merodach. Never had he seen the noble Assyrian so moved; and if by any sacrifice short of the sacrifice of *principle*, he could have given him peace and consolation, he would willingly have done so.

But duty to his God forbade Jasher to listen to the offers of Hatach; and he would not relent—neither would Benaiah have retracted one word of all that he had declared to his master.

They knew not what to say to Hatach, but Jasher did as Nehemiah had done—he lifted up his heart to God, and asked for guidance ere he made the appeal on which he had resolved, and thereby added yet more to the sorrow and disappointment of his kind master.

Then he said, “My lord, it is a sore grief to me, and to my son also, to oppose any of your wishes; and were it not that a higher duty forbids it, how gladly would we in this case comply with all that you desire, and accept your liberal offers. But it cannot be; the servants of the Most High God—the God of our fathers—must not be tempted by any worldly considerations to forget His laws, or unite themselves to strangers. It is our shame and our sorrow that

many of our brethren, both here and in Judea, have done so. But we must not add to the number of such traitors to our holy cause. We must be faithful to Zion, even if we never behold her walls. You would despise us in your heart, Hatach, if we acted otherwise. If we were faithless to our God, could you any more put confidence in us, as you have hitherto done? My lord," he continued very earnestly, and he clasped his hands and fixed his penetrating eyes on Hatach's countenance, "my lord, you have a noble generous soul, you can sympathize with the upright in heart. I come to appeal to your generosity. I come to tell you that the king has consented that Nehemiah should return to Jerusalem, and build again the walls of the city. He has also permitted such of his brethren as are willing, to accompany him. I ask you, Hatach, to release me and my son. I ask you to crown all your many acts of kindness by giving us liberty to go to our own beloved land and aid in her restoration to prosperity and to glory!"

The countenances of both Jasher's auditors had undergone many changes during this earnest address. That of Benaiah expressed the most lively astonishment and joy, followed by intense anxiety, as he listened to his father's glorious announcement and his strong appeal.

Hatach also manifested surprise; but no joy lighted up his features. He felt his regard and esteem for his Jewish bond-servant increased and heightened by the noble resolution and holy devotion which he expressed; and this only made him the more reluctant to part with him and his son.

But—as Jasher had said—the Assyrian was endowed with a generous nature; and his sympathies were powerfully aroused by the fervour of Jasher's manner—a fervour which he saw reflected on Benaiah's fine face, although respect towards his father and his master kept him silent.

There was a pause for a few moments, during which Hatach bent his eyes on the ground, as if undecided as to the reply which he should make to the bold request of his bondman.

Presently he looked up, and the softened expression of his countenance encouraged his auditors to hope.

"Jasher," he said,—and his voice faltered a little—

"Jasher, you have asked much of me : and you have asked it just when you and your son have refused to comply with my most earnest desire, and to carry out my long-cherished project. Your refusal has deeply grieved me; but I will not visit my disappointment on you. I will not oppose the fulfilment of what I well know has long been the object of your fondest hopes, even though it will add greatly to my own sad and desolate feelings. I can ill spare your friendship and your faithful services, Jasher, or those of your high-minded son. But here I release you from all the ties that bound you to me. Go forth to your own land, and act as faithfully there as you have done in this land of your exile; and may the God of your fathers protect and bless you!"

Here Hatach rose from his couch and extended his hands to Jasher and Benaiah, who pressed them gratefully to their lips, and endeavoured to express the feelings which almost overpowered them. But Hatach would not stay to listen. He had made a great sacrifice, and his heart was much oppressed, and he desired to think over the future in solitude. He retired to his private chamber, and Jasher and his son hastened home to tell Abigail of the unexpected success which had attended them, and to call on her to join them in acknowledging "the good hand of their God upon them."

They found Zipporah and Rhoda with their mother; and very joyful was the conversation which ensued, and very fervent the gratitude which was felt by all. Nevertheless, there were in the hearts of all that Jewish family many feelings of regret at the prospect of leaving the only country they had ever known, and breaking up the many friendships they had formed in the land of their captivity. Some sorrow mingled with their joy, and some tears rose unbidden to their eyes.

Is it not always so in this world—that no pleasure, even the purest, is altogether unmixed with pain?

We cannot dwell on all that occupied the time and the care of Jasher and his family during the last days of their residence at Suza. We will not describe the leave-takings and all the last visits to well-known and cherished spots in which they all indulged. Suza had been to them as

familiar a home as Babylon ; and all the friends they most highly valued were residing there.

Of course some of their own race and kindred were about to journey with them to Judea ; but not all the Jews in Suza were either able or willing to join the expedition. Many were detained by business, some by choice, and a large number resolved to wait until the return of Nehemiah, and to hear his report of the state of Jerusalem and its neighbourhood before they ventured to abandon their adopted country and their Persian homes. All were not animated by the same pious and patriotic spirit that dwelt in the breasts of Jasher and his family ; and therefore all were not so willing to leave their present lives of plenty and comfort and to encounter hardship and privation, and probably danger, for the sake of setting their feet on God's own chosen land, and breathing the free air of Zion.



CHAPTER XII.

NOW beautiful were the hills which lay around Jerusalem as the bright rays of the evening sun shone upon them and lighted them up in all their varied colours of rock and verdure !

The summer was far advanced, and the valleys of Judea were green and pleasant. Some fields which had again been brought into cultivation were thick with corn, and promised an abundant harvest if the hand of violence and rapine did not come to blast the hopes of the husbandman. Some orchards and olive-groves and vineyards clothed the hill-sides and gave hopes of a rich crop of fruit in the autumn. But who could say whether they also might not be laid waste by the roving tribes of Arabia, or by the still more hostile Moabites and Ammonites, who so cruelly opposed the restoration of Jerusalem and the return of her ancient inhabitants !

The band of liberated exiles—led by Nehemiah, and escorted by a considerable number of Persian soldiers, both on foot and on horseback—paused when they reached the summit of the last elevation that had hitherto concealed the holy city from their view. They were weary with their long and toilsome journey from Suza—a distance of more than six hundred miles—a great part of which had led them across the desert of Arabia. They consisted of men, women, and children, of old and young, of rich and poor ; but all desired rest and refreshment, and all who were capable of reflection yearned to set foot in “ the city of the Great King.”

This hope had led them on through many difficulties and much fatigue and suffering. This hope had cheered them

through long toilsome days and unsheltered nights, and now it was about to be realized!

There stood Jerusalem! There stood, on her unchanging hills, all that now represented the once glorious and sacred city! But where were the walls that formerly enclosed it? Where was the magnificent temple that once crowned the lofty cliff and stood so majestically forth as the dwelling of Jehovah? Where were the busy streets thronged with a free and happy population, and lined with solid dwellings, the homes of God's own people? Where, in short, was all that made Zion the glory of the whole earth? It was all gone! all swept away! and what had arisen to replace it?

There was indeed the temple which Zerubbabel had commenced; but how could that be compared with the temple of Solomon? There were some scattered dwellings, which the Jews who had already returned from exile had hastily erected, of such materials as they could collect from the ruins or procure in the neighbouring hills; but there were no encircling walls, no protecting towers and ramparts; and the inhabitants of Jerusalem dwelt in continual dread of the incursions of their enemies.

Still the face of nature remained unaltered. The rocks and the mountains, the streams and the valleys, were as they had ever been. They bore the same aspect as when David led his flocks upon the hill of Bethlehem, or his son Solomon stood and planned the temple upon the hill of Moriah. Loneliness and desolation now reigned where once all had been joy and peace and plenty. The glory had departed! "Ichabod" was written on all the ancient splendour of Zion. But still a touching and mournful beauty rested on all that met the eyes of Nehemiah and his company.

The lovely Mount of Olives rose to the right, and was separated from the height on which the temple stood by the valley of Jehoshaphat. Through this ran the brook Kedron, in winter a foaming torrent, but now a quiet rippling stream, flowing over rocks and pebbles. To the left the valley of Himmon—that accursed spot where the fires of Gehenna once burned—extended beneath the hill of Zion; and along its deep hollow the stream that flowed from the fount of

Siloam could be traced as a silver thread, as it ran away towards the wilderness to the east. The mountains of Moab, far away to the right, looked dim and mysterious in the far distance; but many lesser hills rose in the intervening space and gave a picturesque aspect to the view, and caused a variety of light and shade to which the dwellers in the wide plains of Assyria were little accustomed.

On many of the green slopes flocks of sheep were to be seen gathering together as night drew on, and following the steps of their accustomed shepherd, who walked at their head and led them by the sound of his voice to the fold where they would find shelter and protection.

One of these flocks drew near the band of exiles. The shepherd was leading his sheep down to the village of Bethlehem, and many thoughts arose in the minds of Nehemiah and his companions of the days long ago, when the shepherd king of Israel had fed his father's sheep on that very hill-side, and had slain the lion and the bear that came to devour them.

What changes had the land undergone since that olden time! Then David and his brethren must have roamed over the surrounding heights, and gazed at the towers of Salem, little dreaming of the future fate that awaited the city, which was then merely a heathen fortress.

How had the city of Jerusalem—the city of the Lord—been highly exalted since the day when David was called from the sheepfolds to feed God's people Israel! And how had she now fallen!

Tears were in many eyes as they were fixed on the heaps of ruins that marked the circuit of the old boundary wall, and the site of the dwellings and public buildings that once graced the hills of Zion. Among these ruins many houses, or rather huts, had already been erected by the Jews who had returned from captivity; but the city had none of its former grandeur and beauty to boast of. It was from old associations and sacred memories that these Assyrian Jews now gazed with such intense interest on the remains of the holy city, which none of them had ever seen before, but towards which their hearts had been so strongly drawn, and to reach which they had undertaken so long and toil-

some a journey, and sacrificed so much of present ease and comfort.

The elders of the party seemed absorbed in deep and sad reflections; but the younger ones were full of excitement, and eager to reach the long-desired spot.

Zipporah ventured to disturb the meditations of her parents as she guided her mule to Jasher's side and said in a voice that trembled with emotion, "Father, shall we not proceed? I long to set my foot in yonder sacred city. No matter if it lies in ruins, it is Jerusalem still! No matter if the Temple of Zerubbabel is far less magnificent than that of Solomon, the Lord God of our fathers will still dwell in it, and be our God, and we shall be His people!"

Jasher looked admiringly at his daughter's animated countenance, as he read on her expressive features the pure devotion and the ardent patriotism that glowed in her breast.

"You are right, my child," he answered, "you are right to look for Zion's spiritual glory, for all her temporal glory has departed. Still she is beloved of Jehovah; and He will enable us to rebuild her walls and make her again a joyous city. My heart is full of hope, Zipporah, though sadness may be on my countenance. Come, Abigail," he continued, turning to his wife, who was pensively surveying her future home, "Come, let us hasten on to the city before the short twilight is gone and the shades of evening overtake us! See our leader, Nehemiah, has ridden forward; we must enter the city with him."

Benaiah had hurried on to Nehemiah's side. He was a great favourite with the captain of the expedition; and had been entrusted during the journey with much of the management of the party. In all the interviews which Nehemiah had had with the Persian governors and other men in authority "beyond the river," when he delivered to them the letters of King Artaxerxes, Benaiah had accompanied him; and he had shown so much courage and so much discretion in several trying circumstances that his leader looked upon him as his lieutenant, and treated him as his friend.

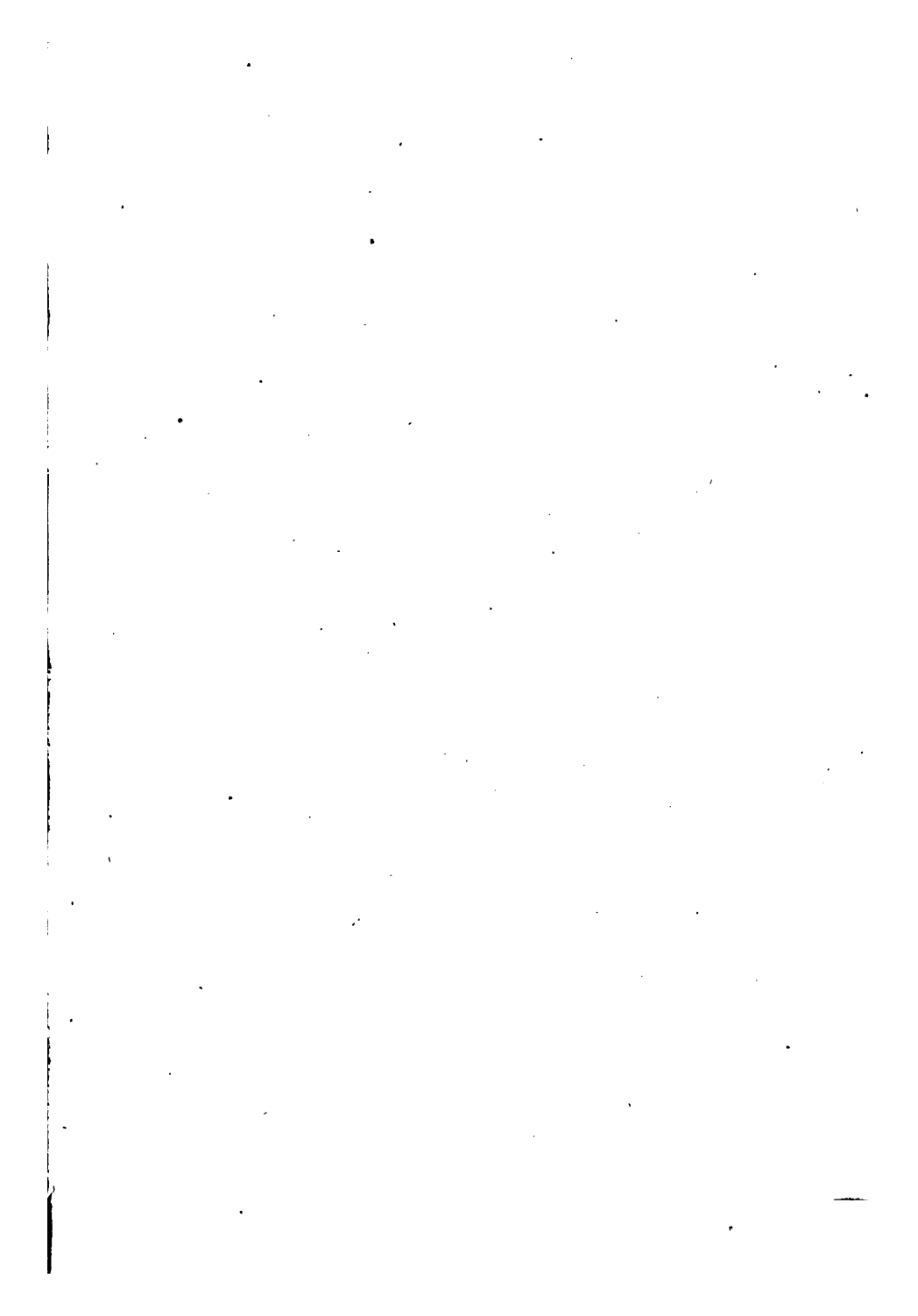
Now the gallant youth rode by his side and listened

eagerly while Jacob—he who had, some months previously, brought letters from Jerusalem to Suza—pointed out to Nehemiah all the localities of the city and neighbourhood, with which he was well acquainted. Jacob had returned into Judea with Ezra, and had remained there ever since, with the exception of making several journeys to Babylon and Suza, when the governor of Jerusalem had occasion to send despatches to the court of Persia. He was, therefore, quite familiar with the holy city, and able to describe to the new governor all that Ezra had done, and all that he had attempted to do, but which had failed of accomplishment in consequence of the opposition of the enemies of the Jews.

Nehemiah was coming to Jerusalem as Ezra's successor in the civil government of the city; but the holy and zealous son of Seraiah was still to act as the ecclesiastical head of his brethren the Jews; and no sentiment of envy or jealousy found place in his breast. He rejoiced in the succour which the King of Persia had been moved to send to his Judean subjects, and he thanked the Lord, who had put it into the heart of such a man as Nehemiah to come to his aid and to relieve him of some part of the burden which now weighed so heavily upon him.

The new leader had sent on a horseman from his last encampment with letters to Ezra, informing him of his speedy arrival, and bidding him be of good cheer, for that the Lord had looked on the affliction of His people and had wrought mightily for their relief. All the governors of the districts through which he had passed had assisted in conveying him and his company on their way, and no calamity had befallen any one of their number. He concluded by inviting Ezra to meet him on his arrival in the holy city, that they might together return thanks to the "God of heaven" for all His great mercies, and implore a continuance of His favour and protection, for the furtherance of the work which they had in hand.

The aged and pious scribe readily obeyed the summons. He and all the elders and chief men of Jerusalem came forth from the city by the way where once the gate of Bethlehem had stood; and with a joyful greeting they welcomed





It was by the light of the moon that Nehemiah made the survey, and the clear cold beams shone on the ruined walls. Page 63.

the new-comers, and led them back to such homes as they could offer them. Nor were the women less hospitably inclined. Their female ingenuity contrived to find accommodation for the wives and daughters of the brave men who had come to aid in rebuilding their beloved city, and before the shades of night had shrouded Jerusalem in darkness, all the band of now happy exiles were enjoying rest and refreshment in "the haven where they would be."

Many of them had friends and relatives already settled in Judea, and ready to receive them into their habitations. Among these were Jasher and his family. A cousin of his named Eleazar had removed from Babylon to Judea in Ezra's company twelve years before. He had then taken with him his wife Drusilla and two children, Adonijah and Rachel. Some years afterwards Drusilla died, and Eleazar had remained a widower and devoted himself to the care of his son and daughter, who were now grown up and amply repaid him for all his pains. His home was at some little distance from the city; he dwelt on the inheritance of his fathers, which he had recovered since his return, and on which he had built a comfortable habitation. He came to welcome his kinsman, and to bid him and all his family to make his house their home.

To this, however, Jasher would not consent. It was too late to remove his family that evening from Jerusalem, and they all with one voice declared their wish to remain in the holy precincts and endeavour to find a permanent home within the walls which Nehemiah had come to build, and in the restoration of which Jasher and Benaiah were eager to take an active part.



CHAPTER XIII.

BENAIAH," said Nehemiah to his young friend, on the evening of the day which followed their arrival in Jerusalem, "Benaiah, are you ready to attend me on a service of danger and difficulty to-night? You and your father know well what are my plans and intentions respecting our ancient city. You know that my earnest desire is to rebuild her walls, and set up her palaces, and make her again a stronghold for our people. But I have kept all this secret from the multitude, because I fear lest it should come to the ears of Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, who are all banded together for our ruin. We must work secretly, Benaiah, and we must work swiftly and untiringly. But first I must go round about Jerusalem, and count her fallen towers and measure her ruined walls, and make a calculation as to the materials to be provided and the workmen to be employed."

"How can I help you, my lord?" exclaimed Benaiah, eagerly. "I am ready to follow you wherever you may lead. Only let me have some hand in the work, and I care not for dangers or difficulty. I feel as if liberty and the free air of Judea had redoubled my strength already."

Nehemiah smiled at the young man's enthusiasm.

"You will have occasion for all your strength and all your courage, my son," he said, kindly. "From all that I have heard this day from Ezra, I perceive that our adversaries are more powerful and more embittered against us even than I had supposed. They will be filled with wrath when they hear that the king has sent me to rebuild this city; and they will do all in their power to obstruct our

proceedings. Great caution is therefore requisite, and everything must be arranged and provided before we commence the work. It is my intention to ride round the walls this night and view their condition, and then to make my report to the priests and the elders, and tell them of my plans. Only three men must go with me. My brother Hanani will be one; Jacob will act as our guide; will you be the third, Benaiah?"

"Willingly," answered Benaiah. "At what hour shall I meet you?"

"Abide with me this evening," said Nehemiah. "I will inform Jasher that I have occasion for your services. It will be well that your mother should remain in ignorance of our somewhat perilous adventure until it has been accomplished."

That night Nehemiah rode forth from the silent city, attended by his brother, his young friend, and his guide. He went out by what still bore the name of the *Gate of the Valley*, before the Dragon well; and he viewed the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down, and the gates that were consumed with fire. Then he went on to the *Gate of the Fountain*—the gate overlooked the far-famed springs of Siloam—and on to the pools of water that still were called the *King's pools*. But there the ruins obstructed the horses steps, and there was no room to advance, so the party went down into the valley, and followed the course of the stream of Siloam as far as it enabled Nehemiah to get a clear view of the ruined walls. Then he turned back, and re-entered the city by the *Gate of the Valley*.

It was by the light of the moon that Nehemiah made this survey; and the clear cold beams shone on the ruined walls, and cast broad dark shadows on the deep valleys and abrupt ravines that encircled and sub-divided the city. The whole prospect was dreary and sad, and the spirit of the king's cup-bearer was depressed as he returned to his own dwelling with his three companions.

"Hanani," he said to his brother, "I fear the desolation of Jerusalem is even greater than I had imagined. No wonder that the elders, and even Ezra himself, have felt deeply discouraged at the prospect before them. I will call

them together as soon as morning dawns, for no time is to be lost in laying our plans for the future."

"You will inspire them with hope, and courage, and perseverance," replied Hanani. "You are weary to-night, Nehemiah, and all seems cheerless. But I know your faith and your dauntless resolution, and I feel confident that what you attempt will be accomplished."

"Yes, Hanani, with the good help of the God of Jacob, I doubt not that much will be done. But how shall I be able to leave the work unfinished when the set time arrives for me to return to the king? The enterprise is greater than I expected, and the time for performing it is short. We must be up and doing as soon as daylight serves. Now let us take our rest, and pray for the blessing of our God upon us."

In the morning Nehemiah assembled the priests, the nobles, and the rulers of Jerusalem, and he said to them,—

"Ye see the distress that we are in; how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. Come and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach."

Then Nehemiah proceeded to tell them of "the good hand of his God upon him." How the Lord had favourably inclined the heart of the king to grant his request, and how graciously Artaxerxes had aided him with letters to the governors, and to Asaph the keeper of the forests.

The cup-bearer might have boasted of his own favour with the king and of the power and influence which he had enjoyed in the court of Persia; and he might have taken to himself the credit of his great success. But Nehemiah was of another spirit; he sought not his own glory, and he only extolled "the good hand of his God," and encouraged his hearers to trust in the same Divine strength and guidance to which alone he looked for success.

His pious and manly spirit aroused the hope and confidence that were beginning to wax faint in the breasts of the priests and the nobles and the rulers of his people. They knew that the work was a very great one; they knew that masses of ruin had to be removed, and a considerable extent of wall to be rebuilt, ere Jerusalem could be again a

fenced city, and safe from the assaults of her foes. They knew that their means were very limited, and the difficulties they had to encounter were very great. But, animated by the example of Nehemiah's faith, and trusting in the assurance of God's blessing, they bravely undertook the task. With one voice they exclaimed, "Let us rise up and build!" and they strengthened themselves for the good work.

Not a day was lost. All who were able to labour were assembled, and divided into separate parties, under the direction of the heads of families; and each party undertook to repair and rebuild certain portions of the wall according to their strength and ability. Very zealously they wrought, and with such rapidity did the work advance, that it was soon known to Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem that the walls of Jerusalem were being upreared.

Great was the wrath and indignation of these enemies of the Jews. At first they despised their efforts, and mocked at them; and Sanballat said to his brethren and to the troops of Samaria, "What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves in their ruined city? Will they again sacrifice in their Temple? Will they make an end of their work in one day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish that has been burned?" His friend and ally, Tobiah the Ammonite, stood by him when he spoke those taunting words; and he replied in the same strain, "Let us not fear them, for if a fox were to fly up upon the walls which they build, he would even break them down."

Then Geshem, the Arab chief, said, "We will accuse them of rebelling against the king, their master. We will threaten to inform him of their proceedings; and if this does not put a stop to their fine building, we will gather our forces together and go up and fight against them. It will never do for us to have a fortified city in the midst of us."

Thus these three evil men conspired against God's chosen people; but their devices were all brought to nought, as we shall see. Nehemiah heard of all their contemptuous and arrogant remarks, and he only replied,—

"The God of Heaven, He will prosper us; therefore,

we, His servants, will arise and build. But these men have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem.”

So Nehemiah and his brave band continued their work, and the Lord did prosper it so much that in fifty and two days all the different portions of the wall at which the various companies laboured were joined together. The breaches were filled up, and a certain degree of security was thereby afforded to the inhabitants of the city. But the more they builded, so much the more did their enemies rage against them, and join themselves together to accomplish their ruin.



CHAPTER XIV.

“**R**ACHEL,” said Eleazar to his daughter one evening, some weeks after the arrival of Nehemiah and his company at Jerusalem, “I wish that you were acquainted with our young kinswoman, the daughter of my cousin Jasher. I have seldom seen so attractive a maiden as Zipporah the elder one; and little Rhoda, her sister, is a charming child. I regret that their father did not comply with my wish that they should all come and reside with us; at all events so long as the streets of Jerusalem lie in ruins. We have room enough and to spare.” And Eleazar looked towards the long low building which had been the home of his forefathers, and had not been utterly destroyed when Jerusalem was laid waste.

It had been a happy and prosperous home in days gone by. Peace and plenty had then reigned in the dwelling, and fertile fields and orchards had surrounded it on every side. When Eleazar returned from exile he found the inheritance of his fathers in a very desolate condition; but he never rested until he had regained possession of the little domain, and he spared no pains to restore it to its former state of fertility.

In this effort he had of late years been greatly aided by his son Adonijah, and the place had again become cultivated and very fruitful. It had, however, been occasionally subjected to the incursions of the enemies of the Jews, who had carried off the produce of the land and robbed and injured the trees of the orchards. This was very discouraging to Eleazar and his son, and many of their friends had endeavoured to persuade them to forsake their estate, and take up their abode with their brethren within the circuit

of the city. But to all such persuasion they had ever turned a deaf ear. They were deeply attached to the spot which had for so many years been in the possession of their family, and where Drusilla, the beloved wife and mother, had died. This feeling was also strongly shared by Rachel. She knew that a residence so far beyond the boundary of the ancient city exposed her and her family to greater danger whenever the roving bands of Arabs, or other opposing tribes, approached Jerusalem. But she trusted in her father and her brother, and their small number of dependents, to protect her, and she clung to her home and to the garden which she had formed and tended, and to the rocks and glades and rippling streams that surrounded her dwelling, and had been the scene of all her youthful pleasures, and were replete with memories of her departed mother.

Rachel had, with the aid of her faithful servant, Hannah, constructed a pleasant bower, or rather grotto, in the rocky face of the height that bounded the garden to the west. She had taken advantage of a natural cavern, and had wrought such improvements by art as to render it a very pleasant retreat in the heat of the day. Many wild plants clothed the rugged surface of the precipitous rocks, and hung down in graceful wreaths as a canopy to the opening. And to these natural beauties Rachel and her handmaid had added many flowering creepers—some of the richest and most varied hues, and some whose scent was wafted into the cavern by the passing breeze, filling the cool chamber with fragrance.

It was in this favourite retreat that Rachel and her father were seated on the evening of which we speak. Eleazar was an old man, his arm had lost its strength, and he could no longer work through the heat of a long summer's day at the walls of the holy city. He and all his kinsmen had undertaken to restore a portion of the wall; and at day-break each morning the old patriot and his son were to be seen at the spot, working with their hands like the poorest of their brethren.

Then, as the day advanced, and Eleazar's hands grew weary, he daily returned to his home and to the society of his daughter, leaving Adonijah to labour until darkness put a period to the work.

From the garden of Eleazar a fine view of the city was to be obtained. It stood uplifted on that rocky height that entitled it, more than any other city in the world, to be called a mountain city : enthroned on a natural fortress, a mountain throne, a mountain sanctuary, pre-eminently "*the Mount of God.*"

The valley of Hinnom wound round the city from the south, and then formed its boundary to the west, and it was at the end of that valley, where the western acclivity terminated, that Eleazar's dwelling was situated.

Looking from the grotto, the ground rose on either side to a considerable height, partly sloping, and green with grass or swelling grain, and clothed with shrubs and fruit-trees, and partly broken and rocky, and only hung with wild vines and other luxuriant plants. Thus the valley formed a sort of vista, at the end of which rose the city, "beautiful for situation," but now only beginning to rise from her ruins.

The groups of workmen could be seen as they built up the broken wall and repaired the breaches, and, as the portion which pertained to Eleazar and his family was opposite to his residence, Rachel watched it with peculiar interest, and often fancied that she could distinguish the form of Adonijah, as, with his sword girded on and his spear by his side, he wrought at the great work. Thus she was watching on the present occasion, and her active hands were plying the distaff, while her eyes were fixed on the holy city, now glowing in the beams of the setting sun, and enshrined as it were in a halo of glory.

Her father had joined her in the grotto, and interrupted her musings by his very welcome presence.

To his remark concerning her young cousins, Rachel replied,—

"I would gladly have received them here, my father. I should be thankful for their companionship, and the advice and protection of their mother. I never felt my life lonely until you and Adonijah undertook to assist in rebuilding the wall. Now I sit here all day, and gaze up the valley at the glorious old city, and I fancy I see you, father, and Adonijah at your side. And I fancy also that you look weary, and then I long for the time when you will return to me and

rest here in my grotto. I am never dull, dear father, when you are with me, and I never fear anything when I know that you are near."

Eleazar looked fondly at his daughter, in whose slight form and gentle face he saw the image of the wife of his youth.

"My child," he said, "I am too old to be a fitting companion for you. Your lonely life in this retired valley is beginning to sadden your young spirit. As your cousins will not come and dwell with you, I think it would be well for you to go to them. These are troublous times, Rachel, and we know not how soon our foes may advance upon Jerusalem. Our home is not directly in the way that they would come, but still I should not deem you safe even in this quiet valley if the enemies of our race were to come up, as I have heard they threaten to do, and combine all their forces against us."

"When you and Adonijah seek the shelter of the new-built walls, I will go with you, my father. But so long as you remain in this beloved home, I pray you do not send me from you. No soldiers are likely to approach Jerusalem in this direction, and if they did so Hannah and I could hide among the clefts of the rocks, where they would never find us. I should not be happy shut up in the city. I should pine for freedom if I could no longer wander about these hills, and follow the course of the Siloam even up to the fount that gushes out of Zion's hill. I love to drink the water there, it is so pure and sparkling. Hannah and I were there this morning, and we filled our water-bottles at the very source of the stream. I placed one here, father, in the cool shade of the cavern, that you might refresh yourself with a draught of the delicious liquid."

And Rachel retired into the depths of the cave, and returned, bearing the water-bottle and a basket of fruit, which she placed before her father. Then, seating herself by his side, she shared his simple repast, and listened while he told her of the progress of the work, and of the zeal and energy which were displayed by her unknown kinsmen, Jasher and Benaiah. Also he related to her all that he had heard of the evil designs of Sanballat and Tobiah and

Geshem, and of the wise and pious conduct of Nehemiah, and his trust in the support of the Lord God of Israel.

Thus did Eleazar and his daughter beguile the time until the light of day had departed, and the moon shed her quiet beams on what had lately been the scene of so much busy industry. All was now silent. The labourers had left their work, and only the watchmen, whom Nehemiah had set to keep guard, might be seen slowly pacing to and fro upon the walls, and pausing ever and anon to look out over the surrounding valleys and craggy hills to detect any approaching danger. Then was the quick step of Adonijah heard by the listening ear of Rachel, and she hastened to meet her brother as he entered the garden by a small wicket gate.

Adonijah was not alone, but the shadow of the overhanging trees prevented Rachel from discerning the form or features of his companion. She concluded that he was one of the men of her father's household, and she led her brother into the family sitting-room where Hannah had prepared the evening meal.

Then the light of the lamp fell on the stranger's features; and, as Rachel turned to speak to her handmaid, their eyes met, and a sudden blush suffused her fair face. The stranger also started, and an expression of surprise and pleasure animated his countenance.

Adonijah looked perplexed, and Eleazar, entering the apartment at that moment, paused on the threshold, and gazed inquiringly from one to another of its inmates.



CHAPTER XV.

THE mystery was soon explained, but for the benefit of our readers we must go back to the early morning, and follow Rachel and Hannah to the source of the brook of Siloam.

It happened that morning that Benaiah was on watch on the walls. He had the command of a party of men whose duty it was to guard the hill of Zion, and keep a look-out to the south. At early dawn they were relieved, and, before joining his father and his other comrades at their daily work, he walked down the hill to taste the sweet waters of Siloë's fountain, and to explore a little of the picturesque valley.

The downward path was narrow and winding, for the hill-side was very precipitous, and as Benaiah descended and turned to the right and the left, he gazed admiringly at the varied prospect, every portion of which was replete with interest for him, as the scene of so many events connected with the past history of his ancient people.

The fountain was hidden from him by projecting rocks and brushwood, but he could hear the cool gushing water as it flowed from its source deep in the rugged hill-side and fell into a little natural basin, where it formed a clear shallow pool, and then overflowing the rocky banks, ran down into the valley and pursued its way towards the west.

As Benaiah approached the spot, other sounds met his ear, mingling with the rippling of the waters, and he paused a moment to listen. They were female voices, and the tones of one of them were sweet and clear, and excited the curiosity of the young soldier. He advanced, and was struck with the picture that met his eye. Kneeling on the

rocky ledge of the little pool was a graceful girl, whose dark eyes were fixed on the waters beneath her, in which her fair face was reflected. In her right hand she held a leather bottle of a slender and elegant form, which she prepared to plunge into the clear reservoir, while she clung with her left hand to the stem of a wild olive-tree that grew near.

By her side stood an older and darker complexioned woman, who also carried a similar bottle, which she had already filled, and was slinging over her shoulders with a leathern thong.

As Benaiah came in sight the young maiden looked up, and so startled was she at the unexpected interruption that she dropped her uplifted bottle, which floated away to the centre of the pool. But for this accident she would have retreated hastily from the spot before the stranger reached it. She did not, however, wish to lose her precious water-bottle, and she only rose to her feet and stood silently gazing at it, and devising various plans for its recapture as soon as the intruder should have passed by.

Very courteously Benaiah approached her, and smiling at her look of embarrassment and distress, he offered to relieve her from her difficulty.

"As Moses assisted the daughters of Israel, and our forefather Jacob lent his aid to Rachel at the well, so I hope you will permit me to render you the small service of recovering your vessel and filling it at this beautiful fountain."

Rachel also smiled at this unintentional allusion to her own name, but she only said,—

"I thank you. I came here to procure water at the cool spring, where it is so clear and pure. I should be sorry to go home with only a half supply, and I fear the bottle has floated far beyond my reach."

Rachel blushed as she spoke, for she was little in the habit of conversing with strangers. But Benaiah's look and manner inspired her with confidence, and she could not repel his ready kindness, or avoid replying to his intelligent remarks while, with his long spear, he guided the stray vessel to the brink of the pool and filled it. Neither could she refuse to let him suspend the bottle on her shoulder when his task was done.

Gladly would he have borne her burden for her to her home, and much did he wish to ask permission to seek that home after the work of the day should be over, but he could not venture to presume so far on the slight acquaintance that accident alone had brought about. He did not even dare to ask her name,—he only expressed his regret that duty called him back to the city walls, and that he could not even offer to carry the water-bottle to the foot of the steep declivity. Nevertheless, when Rachel bade him farewell, and left the fountain with her attendant, Benaiah did not remount the hill until he had watched her light form descending the rugged and narrow path, even as far as his eye could follow her. Then he hastened back to his work, and felt a little ashamed at finding that he was the last of his band, and that his unwonted tardiness had occasioned some surprise to his father.

Benaiah told Jasher that he had been to the fountain on Zion's hill, and that he had been unexpectedly detained by a slight accident which had befallen two women at the pool. But he did not express the interest with which one of these individuals had inspired him—he thought that he might never see the fair stranger again, and that he had better give his mind to the stones and the mortar among which he was labouring, and cease to speculate as to the name and the abode of the unknown maiden.

It so happened that his cousin Adonijah that very day entered into conversation with him on the subject of his home and his father's ancestral property. As members of the same tribe and family the two young men had, from the commencement of the work, been employed on the same portion of the wall, and they had cultivated each other's acquaintance during every period of rest from labour. They had therefore become friends as well as kinsmen, and thus felt a mutual interest and regard. Nevertheless, they had seldom alluded to their respective homes and families. Perhaps each of the young men desired to know more of his relative before he introduced him to the acquaintance of his sisters, and, if so, it was a caution much to be commended. But several weeks had now elapsed during which they had wrought together, and they began to feel almost like brothers.

Adonijah, therefore, spoke to his friend of his cherished home, and his much-loved mother, whose loss his young sister Rachel did so much to supply, both to his father and himself. To all this Benaiah listened with a becoming interest, and at length Adonijah proposed that he should accompany him that very evening down the valley, and pay a visit to the old family dwelling. Eleazar had left the walls before this arrangement was made by the young cousins, and therefore he was as ignorant as his daughter was that a guest would be added to their usual party.

His surprise on entering his apartment was not that Adonijah should have brought his cousin to his home, but that Rachel should so evidently be already acquainted with him, when it seemed impossible that they should ever have met.

This also puzzled Adonijah equally, but a short narration of the morning's adventure cleared up the mystery, and it was very evident to Adonijah that the discovery of his relationship to the maiden whom he had met at the fountain was a source of great satisfaction to Benaiah.

"My sisters must make your acquaintance," he said to Rachel, as they sat at the evening meal, over which she gracefully presided. "Will you not come to our dwelling to-morrow when your father and Adonijah go up to the city, and spend the hours with my mother and Zipporah, while we all work at the building? They much desire to see you, and they will gladly welcome you."

Rachel looked at her father for his consent to this invitation, which she felt much inclined to accept, and he replied,—

"It is what I should wish you to do, Rachel. You know I told you this evening that I had seen your cousins, and that it was high time you saw them also. We will take my daughter to your mother's house, Benaiah, she will bestow on her a mother's care and love."

"Oh how gladly will she receive her!" exclaimed Benaiah, with an eagerness that brought the quick colour to Rachel's cheek. "How gladly would she make her house our cousin Rachel's home," he added; "I have heard her express anxiety and uneasiness that she should dwell so far from the protection of the city."

"I dwell with my father," replied Rachel, quietly, as if that was an answer to every argument and every fear.

But Benaiah continued to urge every objection that he could devise to his cousin's continued residence in the retired valley, while her father and brother were engaged nearly all the day in Jerusalem. He assured Eleazar that it was his mother's intention to propose Rachel's removal to her house in the city, and he begged him to consider the plan and let it be brought to pass before the threatened attack of the Ammonites and the Horonites and the Arabians could be carried into effect.

"I will consider it, Adonijah," said the old man, and he looked tenderly and anxiously at his beloved child as he spoke. "I will talk to Jasher on the subject to-morrow, when I meet him on the walls. I must not allow my Rachel to incur any danger through her devotion to her father."

"There is no danger yet, my father," said Rachel, gently. But she did not press the subject, and Eleazar observed that her opposition to going into the city was less decided than it had been hitherto.



CHAPTER XVI.

N a valley, now called the *Vady Harith*—which in old times formed one of the passes from the plain of Jericho to the interior of the territories of the tribe of Benjamin—a large and widely-scattered camp was to be seen. The black camel-hair tents of the Arabs occupied the most easterly position, where the valley was wider and the ground more level. Next to them were the Horonites, under their leader, Sanballat, and towards the west the Ammonites were stationed. Here the valley became narrow and rocky, and the sides of the deep ravine were pierced with many caves, in which the troops of Tobiah had their temporary habitation.

In this retired valley the three leaders of the Jews' adversaries had assembled their forces, and were busily devising plans for the utter destruction of Jerusalem and her inhabitants. In the tent of Geshem, the Arab chief, they met, and many minor causes of disagreement between these men and their followers were set aside, and all forgotten in their eagerness to carry out their one grand object of stopping the work at Jerusalem.

Some offence had been given by Geshem to his brother chiefs, and some taunts had been uttered as to his tardiness in arriving at the place of meeting. He now declared his readiness to be the first in the meditated attack; and he volunteered to go with a small band of his followers, mounted on the swift horses of the desert, to take a secret survey of the walls and defences of Jerusalem. The wily Arabian had a selfish motive in this proposal, and we shall see how his artifice succeeded.

"We will ride like the wind across the desert," he said.

"Before sunset this evening we will be in the head of the vale of Kedron, and there we will hide until darkness covers the land. Then we will tie our horses beneath the olive-trees that stand so thick in that valley, and we will climb up to the walls that these proud Jews are building and mark their weakest points. The moon will rise before midnight, and give us light enough. We are light of foot and firm of hand; we can go where the fox would find no place for the sole of his foot. We can attack our foes like the lion, or flee away like the antelope, to return again with a fiercer charge than before."

"It is well," replied Sanballat to this boastful speech. "You shall do as you have said. When shall we meet you here to know how your enterprise has sped?"

"Before nightfall to-morrow I will return, and then we will decide on our plan of attack."

"The horses that run as swiftly as antelopes might bring you back long before sunset," said Tobiah, rather sneeringly. "What should occupy the Arab chieftain so many hours of the day?"

Geshem returned an angry glance to this remark, but he only replied,—

"My time will be profitably spent; the caitiff Jews shall know how it is employed."

Sanballat saw that his allies were becoming wrathful, and he dreaded lest either of them should fall off from the confederacy which they had formed against the people of God. He, therefore, endeavoured to silence Tobiah, and to keep Geshem in good humour.

"My friends," he said, "we must have mutual confidence in one another. I am sure that the Arabian prince has the same cause at heart which inspires us and our followers. We can depend on his courage and ability to accomplish all that he has promised, and more. Let us now break up our conference, and proceed with our preparations. We will meet here again to-morrow at sunset, to hear all that Geshem has to tell us of the present state of the rebellious city."

So Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, left the Arab tent; and Geshem immediately commenced his arrangements for his proposed expedition.

Now it so happened that in his wanderings round the holy city several months previous to the period at which our story has arrived, the Arabian chief had climbed the heights which bounded the valley of Hinnom at its northern extremity, and he had looked down on the dwelling of Eleazar, and the fertile fields, and fruitful orchards that surrounded it. So much apparent wealth and plenty aroused his covetousness, and he immediately formed a resolution to invade the little territory, and to carry off all the portable property, and drive away the flocks and herds that fed in the sheltered and verdant glades.

This purpose had never left his mind, and in forming an alliance with Sanballat and Tobiah he was quite as much influenced by the hope of accomplishing it, as he was by a desire to humble and distress the Jews. He did not, however, impart his design to either of his confederates. He knew that he could not trust them; he knew that they were as greedy of gain as he was himself, and he feared lest they should deprive him of a portion of his expected spoil. He therefore laid all his plans quite secretly, and he proposed to go and survey the walls of the city with an ulterior view to his own interest.

We will leave him to his evil devices and return to Jerusalem, where the Lord's people were carrying on their work with untiring zeal and activity.

That same day that Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem met in the tent of the Arabian prince, Rachel accompanied her father and brother to the city, and was introduced to her relatives. They met with mutual pleasure, and when Eleazar and his son repaired to the walls with Jasher and Benaiah, the female members of their respective families remained very happily together in Abigail's house. It was a great change for Rachel to find herself with young and cheerful companions. Her usual life was a very dull and monotonous one, and although she had never felt it tedious or desired any alteration in it, she did not now the less enjoy the society of her cousins. Very pleasantly the day passed by. The three young girls amused themselves with singing some of the hymns of the "sweet psalmist of Israel," which Zipporah accompanied on her lyre, while

Abigail and her maids worked industriously at such articles as were needed for the use of the household.

Soon after mid-day Eleazar joined them, as he needed rest from the laborious work of building, and when the great heat of the day had subsided he conducted his daughter and her cousins down to the brook Kedron, and to the olive-groves that clothed the hill-side beyond. Zipporah and Rhoda had never yet visited that spot, then deeply interesting to every Jew as the scene of King David's humiliation and flight, and since that time so precious to the heart of every Christian as the scene of the deeper humiliation and suffering of David's Divine antitype.

The natural beauty of the scenery would alone have charmed the young girls, who had all their lives been accustomed to the level plains of Assyria. But the historical recollections connected with the passage of the brook Kedron, and "the way up the hill into the wilderness," rendered it doubly attractive to the enthusiastic Zipporah.

Long they tarried there, even until Jasher and the young men returned from their daily labour, and joined them in the garden of olives. Then the whole party returned to Jasher's dwelling, where Rachel took leave of her young friends with a promise from them that Benaiah should conduct them to her home in the valley on the following morning at break of day; and that on the day after they should all return together to the city, where Rachel should remain under Abigail's care until the present troubles had passed away, and her retired home was again a safe habitation.

But "*Man proposes and God disposes.*"



CHAPTER XVII.

“**A**RE you not frightened, Rachel?” inquired little Rhoda of her cousin, as the three girls seated themselves on a rock that overhung the termination of the valley in which lay the dwelling of Eleazar. “Are you not frightened at having to be alone, while your father and brothers are away in the city?”

“No, Rhoda; I never think of fear. No one has ever harmed me, and I hope no one but friends will ever enter our happy valley. My father now wishes me to go and dwell with you in Jerusalem; and I am well content to do so, that I may thus become better acquainted with our nearest relatives. But I have no fear; and I shall regret these rocks and flowery banks, and my garden, and my sheep and goats; and I shall be glad to return to them again—and always glad, dear Rhoda, when you and Zipporah can come and visit me in my beloved home. I have dwelt here almost as long as I can remember, and the city seems strange to me.”

“As strange as this solitude does to us,” said Zipporah. “We have never known anything but city life. Our home has always been either in Great Babylon, or in the hardly less luxurious and busy Suza. I feel that I should love this wild retired spot far better than even the marble palaces, and hanging gardens, and ever-moving scenes that I have been accustomed to. My heart seems to expand, and my spirit to rise, as I look around me, and see the works of God, instead of the things that only men have made. Rachel, I wish my father would come and take up his abode in this sweet valley. There is room enough up there beyond Eleazar’s fields.”

"Room enough and to spare, Zipporah," replied her cousin; "and my father and Adonijah would help to build you a house, and make folds for your sheep and cattle; and we would live as one large family—even as our ancestors used to do in ages long past, before the Chaldeans and Assyrians invaded our pleasant land, and carried our fathers into captivity."

"But not yet, Rachel—not yet, Zipporah!" exclaimed Rhoda, eagerly interrupting the schemes of her sister and cousin, and looking rather terrified at the idea of leaving the protection of the city walls, and taking up her abode in the silent and lonely valley. "Do not ask our father to come away from Jerusalem until our enemies have ceased to persecute us. Dear Rachel," she added, imploringly, as she caught her cousin's hand, and looked up into her face with tearful eyes, "have you heard how the Ammonites, and the Horonites, and the Arabians have banded together against us? We in the city can talk and think of nothing else. Their troops are assembling in some secret place up to the north, near the river Jordan; and Nehemiah told Benaiah that ere many weeks had passed, they would probably come down to attack us. Indeed it must be true, for I heard the wise and good Nehemiah saying to our father that he knew of their evil devices, and that he should set all our strong men in their appointed places behind the wall, with their swords, and their spears, and their bows, in due time to meet their attack. I was sitting on the ground among the oleanders, and my father and Nehemiah were walking to and fro on the terrace, and they did not see me. I was very much frightened at all they said, and I did not dare to move. But presently the governor said to my father, 'Let us not be afraid of them, Jasher; remember the Lord Jehovah is great and terrible, and let us fight for our brethren, our sons and our daughters, our wives and our houses!' Then my father looked very courageous, and I also felt comforted."

"When did you hear all this, Rhoda?" said her sister; "and why did you not tell me of it?"

"I did not wish to terrify you, dear Zipporah, so I kept it to myself. But I ought to have remembered how brave you are and that you never tremble as I do at the thought



Four men of wild and barbarous aspect appeared over the brow of the hill. Page 84.



of danger. O Zipporah, I wish we were safe in the strong city of Babylon!"

"Say not so, my darling Rhoda!" replied her sister, drawing her fondly towards her, as if to shield her from even a vision of danger. "Remember that we are the Lord's own people, whom He has promised to bless and protect. It is in His strength that Nehemiah has brought us out of our place of captivity, and settled us again in our own land! It is in the strength of the Lord that he has rebuilt the walls, and is setting up the gates of Jerusalem. It is by the wisdom which the Lord has given him that he has been enabled to discover all the devices of our enemies, and by that same Divine strength and wisdom they will also be enabled to bring them all to nought. Do not fear them, my sister—'Greater is He that is for us than all they that are against us.' No evil can befall us without His permission; and He can bring us out of every peril."

"I wish I had your brave spirit, Zipporah," said the little girl, with a sigh. "I feel happy when you talk to me, and tell me of the power and the goodness of God; but when I hear of dangers, and think of all our foes, I tremble and fear again."

"You must try to forget your fears now, dear Rhoda;" said Rachel. "Here, at all events, you are safe at present; and to-morrow we shall all go into the city, and remain within the strong high walls until our enemies have given up their cruel plans, and left the neighbourhood. I have lived here so long, and have so often heard of threatened dangers that never came, that I have learnt not to fear. You never knew in Babylon or Suza what it was to have hostile bands ravaging the country, and carrying off the flocks and herds, and the produce of the fields. I have seen our meadows and orchards overrun by robbers; but my father and my brothers and our servants protected the house, and no great harm was done, except to our trees and shrubs. Perhaps the enemies who now threaten us would be more powerful and more cruel. I would not that a band of soldiers should come this way, and I am glad that I am to enjoy the protection of your home, Rhoda, for a time. I think you have infected me with your fears."

Rachel spoke playfully, but there was a shade of anxiety on her fair countenance that caught the observant eye of Zipporah.

"Go up the bank, Rhoda," she said to her sister, "and gather some of those gay flowers that grow so luxuriantly there. I will twine you a garland to deck your hair when our kinsmen return from the city. Perhaps our brother will accompany them, and he will take back a cluster of roses to our mother."

Zipporah wished the young girl to go out of hearing, for she saw that her cousin was anxious.

"Rachel," she said, when Rhoda was so busily engaged among the bright blossoms as to have quite forgotten her fears, "Rachel, do you really share in Rhoda's apprehensions?"

"A feeling of dread has just come over me, Zipporah;" and she smiled as she said so. "When I spoke of a band of soldiers coming into our valley, I pictured what the horror of it would be. I thought how helpless we should be with no other protection than what our trusty Hannah could afford us. Zipporah, it would be very dreadful. I am more than ever thankful that I am not to remain here any longer. I wonder that I have not felt fear until now."

A wild shriek from Rhoda startled and dismayed the cousins. They looked upward, and saw the child flying towards them, still grasping her bright flowers, but with terror depicted on her features.

She could not speak; but she waved her arms wildly, as a signal for her sister and cousin to escape down the hill. As they sprang to their feet they beheld the cause of her alarm—and strongly they shared it.

Four men of wild and barbarous aspect appeared over the brow of the hill. They were armed with swords and lances; and from their costume Rachel supposed them to be Arabians—sons of the desert—and so they truly were.

These men were evidently in pursuit of Rhoda, whose form they had descried as she roamed about in search of flowers, while they were lying in ambush among some low thick trees on the other side. Instantly Geshem resolved to secure the child, in the hope of obtaining a high ran-

som for liberation; and started in the chase, followed, at some distance, by his attendants.

Like a young antelope Rhoda bounded down the steep descent, still waving her arms, and striving to utter words of alarm, which her countenance very visibly expressed.

Rachel caught her cousin's hand and endeavoured to draw her away, but Zipporah remained motionless. She saw that the leader of the wild band was gaining on Rhoda; and she could not forsake her.

"Fly, Zipporah!" shrieked the child, as Geshem grasped her arm. But Zipporah did not fly; she broke from Rachel, and rushed up towards the spot where her sister was struggling wildly in the hands of the Arab chief.

"Release the child!" she exclaimed in a tone of command that rather startled Geshem. "Give me my sister, and leave us in peace! Here"—she continued, tearing off her bracelets and ornaments of gold—"take these, and depart."

The smile that played on the features of the Arab was not an encouraging one. He gazed at Zipporah, and he thought that she would prove a still more valuable prize than her young sister. He also wished to secure Rachel, who remained riveted to the spot where her cousin had left her. He made a rapid sign to his men to surround and capture her, and then he held out his hand as if to receive the proffered jewels.

"I accept your offer, lady," he said. "Give me those chains of gold, and I will release the child. I swear it on the honour of a chief."

Zipporah approached, and placed the ornaments in his extended hand, at the same time taking hold of her sister, to draw her away from his loosening grasp.

He let her go—but, ere Zipporah could turn and escape, his powerful hand was upon her arm, and she felt that she was a captive. She did not struggle, for she knew that it would be useless. But she attempted to appeal to that honour which he had pledged, and which he considered he had fully redeemed in the release of Rhoda.

Soon she saw that all was in vain. Then, turning to her terrified sister who still clung to her, weeping bitterly, she said in a calm and decided voice, "Go, Rhoda—you are

free. Go and tell Eleazar what has befallen me. Where is Rachel? Has she escaped?" she added in a low and anxious tone.

She turned and saw her cousin, who at that moment was being made to share her own sad fate. The three Arabs had gone swiftly round some rocks and bushes, so as to place themselves below her on the hill, and thus intercept her flight. In her intense anxiety about her cousins, she had not observed this movement; and, before she was aware of it, she found herself seized, and lifted from the ground, and rapidly borne towards the place where Geshem held Zipporah, as in a vice.

"Fly, I command you, Rhoda!" cried Zipporah, again. "Your escape is now our only hope!"

The child cast one lingering, tearful look of agony in her sister's face; and then flew into a thicket, and disappeared.

"Shall we follow her?" inquired the Arabs.

"No," replied Geshem. "My honour is pledged for her escape; and we shall have enough to do to carry off these two prizes!"



CHAPTER XVIII.

ELEAZAR, as was his wont, returned to his home soon after mid-day. He found the house deserted by all except Hannah; but this did not excite in his breast either surprise or alarm. He knew that Rachel intended to show her cousins all the beauties of her ancestral home, and the fine views of Jerusalem and the adjacent country which could be obtained from the neighbouring heights.

"Probably the young girls have taken shelter from the noon-tide heat in one of the many caves that pierce the hill-side," he said to Hannah, "and they will not return until evening."

So the old man partook of his customary repast, and then sought rest beneath the trees of his garden. There, exhausted with the labour to which he was very unequal, but which he could not be persuaded to relinquish, he fell asleep; and there he remained until Adonijah and his cousin Benaiah came home at eventide.

The two young men were struck with the silence and deserted appearance of the house; and they immediately passed on to the garden, hoping there to find a happy party to welcome them. What was their surprise at finding Eleazar alone, and still slumbering on the ground. Their footsteps awoke him, and he arose and looked wonderingly at the sky, where the red glow of the setting sun so clearly told him how long a time had elapsed since he had lain him down to rest.

"Where is Rachel?" he asked. Where are your sisters, Benaiah? I thought they would have come to arouse me long ere sunset."

"We have not seen them, father," replied Adonijah. "No doubt they are in Rachel's chamber, assisting her to prepare for her removal to the city. Truly I am glad that that plan has been decided on, for this is not a safe abode for her any longer. Those who kept watch on the north side of the city last night, reported that they saw the forms of several men prowling around at a distance beyond the walls. They were too far off to be pursued, but the faint light of the moon enabled the watchers to perceive that they were taking a survey of our defences. This morning, the governor and a band of our bravest men have searched all that part of the valley to discover these spies, but all in vain. They must have retired again to a distance, and concealed themselves in some deep ravine; or else they may have returned to the camp, where our enemies have congregated together."

"May the good Lord defend us from all their evil designs!" said Eleazar, fervently. "Oh, that the time were come when every one might dwell under his own vine and his own fig-tree; no man making him afraid."

"With such a spirit as that of Nehemiah to guide and animate us—with such a faith as his to inspire us, and such courage to meet and conquer all opposing enemies, surely the victory will soon be ours!" replied Benaiah, earnestly. "Under such a leader, no obstacles can long obstruct our way. Peace and security must soon be ours."

Eleazar smiled at the young soldier's enthusiastic confidence.

"My son," he said, kindly, "you are right. Such a trusting spirit brings about the things it hopes for. But I am old, I have waited for many, many years, hoping for that peace of which you speak so assuredly. May my merciful God permit me to see it before I go hence! I feel anxious and fearful this evening. Go, Adonijah, and seek your sister and cousins; it is time that the evening meal were served. Benaiah will have to return to the city very late, and I know not that his path may be free from danger."

"Do not fear for me, Eleazar," answered the youth, "I am well armed, and those skulking wretches would not dare to attack me."

"Why does not Adonijah return?" said the old man, restlessly, and he looked eagerly towards the house. "Where is my child—my Rachel?" and he rose to re-enter his dwelling. At the threshold he met his son looking strangely anxious and perplexed, and closely followed by Hannah.

"Where is your mistress? Where are her young cousins who were entrusted to my care?" gasped out Eleazar, while fear was strongly depicted on his quivering features.

"I thought they were with you, my master," replied the handmaid, hurriedly. "Surely, surely, they have not remained on the hill-side until this late hour!"

From Adonijah Hannah had just heard of the unusual cause for alarm, and terror had taken possession of her.

"We must seek them instantly," she exclaimed. "The men have just returned from their work. I will provide them with torches, and we will set off at once." And the faithful and energetic servant hastened to accomplish her purpose.

Not less anxious or less eager were those she left behind her. The two young men looked hurriedly at their weapons, while Eleazar raised his hands and eyes towards heaven and murmured in broken accents,—

"O Lord God of my fathers, God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, have mercy on Thy servant, and preserve my child. Oh, save them all from the hands of ungodly and cruel men!"

He attempted to follow his son and Benaiah, as they turned to leave the house, but his limbs refused to carry him. At that moment Hannah returned, saying,—

"The men are ready and armed. No time is to be lost. Let me go with you!"

But Adonijah answered, "Nay, Hannah—your place is here. Remain, and do all you can to strengthen and comfort my poor father. He most needs your aid."

Hannah saw that he was right. Gently she led the old man into an inner room, and all the other inmates of the house started in search of the lost maidens.

Rapidly they ascended the hill in the direction which Hannah had pointed out; nor did they pause until they

reached the spot where the struggle and the capture had taken place. There, as they waved their torches around, the quick eye of Benaiah observed a few sprays of flowers lying on the ground; and, on looking closer, he and his companions perceived that the short mossy herbage had been trodden by many feet, and that some of them had worn the sandals which were common among the wandering tribes.

What a pang struck to the hearts of the young men at this discovery! They spoke very few words; but they strained their eyes to trace the footmarks, and they followed them to the brow of the hill, where all verdure ceased, and the loose stones and sand retained no impression of the feet that had passed over them.

After a long and fruitless search they were compelled to turn back, deeply and sorrowfully musing on the sad fate of their sisters, and devising many plans for their discovery. As they passed the spot which had first engaged their attention, Adonijah looked again on the trodden ground, and he exclaimed,—

“Surely one of them has escaped! See, here are footmarks going towards the thicket.” And he hastily turned that way, followed by all his companions.

Carefully they tracked the light and slender steps. They led downwards through the grove, and among tangled weeds and grass. Suddenly Adonijah paused; and then he sprang forward, and raised from the ground, where it lay almost hidden, the senseless form of Rhoda.

She had sunk on that spot when she escaped from the Arabs. Terror had overwhelmed her, and her senses had fled; and but for the timely arrival of succour she might have passed from her swoon into the sleep of death.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT was long before Rhoda recovered her senses sufficiently to be able to give an intelligible account of all that had occurred. Fear and the night-dews had chilled her young blood, and blanched her features; and it required all Hannah's skill and care to restore her. The story she had to tell was a sad confirmation of all that Eleazar had apprehended, and the young men had more than conjectured; and now it only remained to take the most prompt and effectual measures for the recovery of the captives.

Eleazar had been overcome by fear and anxiety when the calamity was only a vague apprehension; but now that he knew the worst his spirit rose to the emergency, and he was as prompt and decisive in forming a plan of action as either his son or Benaiah.

We will not repeat all the earnest discussions that took place. We need only say that about midnight Benaiah returned to his home, accompanied by Adonijah. He found that his unusual absence had already aroused some anxiety; and the news which he had to communicate spread grief and despair among all the inmates of his dwelling.

His own heart was wrung with sorrow, and burning with indignation. He felt a weight of anguish that he had never before experienced, or even imagined, and he could say little to console his parents.

At daybreak he and his cousin repaired to the governor's house, to tell him the sad event which had occurred; and Nehemiah made arrangements for immediate and active steps being taken. The existence of the camp of the confederates in the ravine near the Jordan was no secret to

Nehemiah. He knew of the proposed attack of the combined forces of Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem, and he had adopted such measures of defence as he deemed most advisable. To this camp he had no doubt that Zipporah and Rachel had been carried. He felt little fear as to their safety, for he conjectured that the hope of obtaining a large ransom had led the Arabs to commit this act of violence; and he proposed to Benaiah that he and his cousin and a chosen band of men should repair to the camp that very day, and carry on negotiations for the release of the captives.

To this proposal the young men gave a ready assent; and no time was lost in preparations. Before, however, they were ready to start on the interesting expedition, Eleazar arrived at Jasher's dwelling, bringing with him both Rhoda and Hannah. The child was still suffering from the effects of terror and exhaustion, and Eleazar had placed her on his daughter's mule, and led her gently back to Jerusalem. Hannah also accompanied her; partly to cheer and comfort Rhoda, and partly because her master began to feel that the lonely valley was no longer a place of security for the females of his family, while he and Adonijah were necessarily so much from home.

Very sad was the meeting of the bereaved relatives. Each family mourned a similar loss, and all were tormented by similar fears. They were agreed in hoping that a liberal ransom would procure the liberation of the captive maidens, and they were equally agreed in their resolution to make every sacrifice in their power rather than leave Zipporah and Rachel in the hands of their captors an hour longer than could be avoided.

Very urgent were the exhortations which Benaiah and Adonijah received from their respective parents, to use both courage and discretion in the important negotiation; and, above all, to be speedy in their movements. Such exhortations were, however, superfluous, for the young men were animated by such feelings of affection towards the sufferers, and of indignation towards those who had so cruelly torn them from their homes, as to render it far more needful to curb their impetuosity, and check their impatience, than to urge them to greater zeal and energy in the enterprise.

Before the sun had risen high in the clear blue heavens the little cavalcade set forth. They wound down the declivity to the north of the city, passing near the tombs of the ancient kings of Judah, which excited the curiosity of Benaiah as he caught a sight of many covered stone entrances on elevated and picturesque sites. Adonijah informed him that the doorways led to deep caverns and sepulchres hewn in the rocky hill-side ; but this was not a time for examining even the most interesting remains of antiquity, the business in hand admitted of no delay, and Benaiah postponed all investigations and researches into these royal tombs until a period should arrive when he could pursue them at his leisure, and with a mind less distracted by anxiety.

Had he known as much as we know he would have indulged his curiosity at once ; and he would not have left the sepulchres until he had searched every one of them most thoroughly.

There were bright, but tearful, eyes gazing at him and his companions from the deep window that had been cut in the living rock to give light to one of the most elevated of these tombs. There were hearts that beat with hope and excitement as the mounted party from Jerusalem came in sight, and that sank again in despair as the well-known forms passed on at too great a distance to admit of any signal being made. There were lips that breathed a fervent prayer for aid that seemed to be almost hopeless ; and that then uttered a loud wild cry in the faint chance of attracting the attention of some one of the friendly cavalcade.

So far above the heads of the passers-by were those who raised that cry, that it scarcely reached their ears, and gave them no idea of a human voice.

"How dreary is that sound !" exclaimed Benaiah to his cousin, as he turned his head, and looked towards the lofty and precipitous rock from which the cry proceeded. "It seems to tell of the desolation of our holy inheritance, and the weakness of our brethren. The jackals and the wild birds make their homes in the neighbourhood of our sacred city, and dwell even in the sepulchres of our kings. They cry out even as if to defy us. Adonijah," he added, "we

must have a hunting party among these rocks and ravines, as soon as our more important work is done. We must not allow vultures and foxes to reign where our kings take their rest."

"Willingly," replied his cousin. "I am well acquainted with all these haunts, and have often carried home much prey from the royal sepulchres; and also from that hill to the left, where you can just discern the openings of many other graves. There lie the remains of the Judges of Israel—those great and good men whom the Lord raised up to deliver His people from the hands of their oppressors. When we are again at peace I will conduct you thither, and you will find plenty of game among the clefts of the rocks. But now let us ride forward, we must reach the camp before the day declines."

And they galloped swiftly on, regardless of the hands that were extended towards them, and the voices that called so plaintively upon their names, and the beloved eyes that followed their retreating forms even until they were out of sight. They hardly slackened their pace until they reached the western entrance of the valley which had been chosen by the confederates as their place of assemblage. It was, as we have said, rough and stony at that end, and it was occupied by the Ammonites, under their leader, Tobiah.

A few rude huts had been erected here and there on the more level spots; but the greater part of the band had made their habitation in the caves of the rocks; and as the party of Jews entered the valley, they came forth from their rough dwellings, and stood in groups on the hill-side loudly challenging the intruders.

"Where is your chief?" inquired Adonijah of some men who approached the nearest. "I have a message to Tobiah."

"Our prince is gone to the camp of the Arabians," replied one of the Ammonites, in rather a surly tone. "The chiefs hold a council there this evening, at which I do not think any Jews will be welcome."

"Welcome or not welcome, we must repair to their place of meeting," replied Adonijah, with an undaunted tone and look that had a very beneficial influence on the rude Am-

monite. He glanced more respectfully at the strangers, and when Benaiah offered him a piece of money, saying,—

“Here, my friend, conduct us to your chiefs without delay,” a smile lighted up his dark countenance, and he immediately led the way down the valley, followed by the two young men and their attendants.

It may cause some surprise that this small party of Jews should venture thus boldly into the very stronghold of their enemies. But it was not merely personal courage that led Benaiah and Adonijah to advance thus confidently into the midst of the camp of the confederates. They were not fool-hardy, and they had no intention of sacrificing their lives or their liberties, but they knew that a bold and decided bearing would be most likely to produce a good effect on the men with whom they had to deal; and they also knew that the arrival of Nehemiah at Jerusalem, armed with authority from King Artaxerxes to act as Governor of Judea, had considerably awed the enemies of the Jews, and rendered them more cautious and more fearful of bringing on themselves the wrath of the Persian rulers. The plan which the confederates had now devised for the destruction of the Holy City was a bold one, and they well knew that it must be conducted with great secrecy in order to its complete success; after which they hoped to be able to defy the resentment of the local governors, and to retain possession of the districts in which they had fixed their habitations. To have seized on the Jewish envoys would have been a premature and dangerous measure, and one that would probably cause their whole scheme to fail, and Nehemiah had wisely calculated on all these circumstances before he had sanctioned the enterprise.

The cup-bearer knew of the evil designs of the confederates—as we have already stated—and he desired that they should be aware that he possessed that knowledge, and had already acted upon it in an efficient manner.

CHAPTER XX.

THROUGH the rocky dwellings of the Ammonites—through the hardly less rude huts of the Horonites, and into the midst of the somewhat more civilized camp of the Arabians—the Jewish party were led by their guide. Benaiah was struck by the change in his manner when he was offered a reward, and he resolved on endeavouring to obtain from his cupidity what might be hopeless from any other motive. He therefore drew him into conversation, and, by his own courteous manner, disarmed the Ammonite of his unfriendly feelings, and led him to think that it might be to his interest to assist the generous and noble-looking young Israelite, and to give him all the information that he might desire.

Benaiah took care to improve the good impression which he felt he had made on Caleb—for such the Ammonite informed him was his name—by appearing to place confidence in him. When they reached the tent of the Arab chief, and dismounted, he gave his horse into Caleb's charge, and desired him to guard it carefully, as the saddle-bags contained money and other valuables; "for the purpose," he added, "of repaying those who served him faithfully, and assisted him in the object which had brought him to the camp."

Caleb gave a glance of intelligence and satisfaction, and Benaiah felt that he had secured him as an adherent—at least so long as he should make it worth the man's while to serve him.

Before we introduce Benaiah and his cousin into the presence of the confederate chiefs, we will tell of Geshem's return to the camp, and of the report which he brought to his associates.

Duly, at the appointed time, he appeared among his people; but it was observed that only one of his followers returned with him, and this man refused to give any account of his two comrades, except that they were employed by their chief.

As the sun declined towards the horizon, Sanballat and Tobiah repaired to the tent of the Arabian prince, to hear from him, as had been arranged on the previous day, a full account of his observations and discoveries relative to the state of Jerusalem, and the strength of her newly-built walls.

The wily Arab told them a great deal which was merely conjectural, for his own survey of the place had been very cursory, and very limited. And he forebore to inform them of what had really occurred to interest him and to occupy his time; for he had, as we know, made a great prize, and he was very anxious to secure to himself the whole of the profit which might result from the adventure.

Very cleverly he described the appearance of the wall and the gates of the Jewish city, and he even ventured on a guess as to the most desirable points of attack, and his associates were well satisfied with the way in which he had performed his mission. They proceeded to make their arrangements for the projected assault, and they said,—

“They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.”

So they conspired against the Lord's people, but He brought all their evil devices to nought.

While they thus debated, one of Tobiah's attendants—who waited outside the tent, and who had received a message from Caleb—entered, and announced the arrival of a party of Jews, the leaders of whom desired to be admitted to the chiefs.

“Ha!” exclaimed Geshem, quickly; “they come, no doubt, to offer terms in the hope that we may be induced to remove our army from this neighbourhood, and leave them in peace to fortify their city, and rebel against the great king.”

But Geshem had a very shrewd suspicion of the errand which had brought these Jews to the valley, and he was planning how to mislead them, and deceive his own allies.

"Let them enter," said Sanballat. "If they come from the new governor, Nehemiah, we must treat them with outward respect, but we will make no treaty with them."

The heavy camel's-hair curtain which formed the door of the tent was drawn aside, and Benaiah and Adonijah stood before the bitter adversaries of their race. The whole aspect and demeanour of the two young men was such as to inspire involuntarily that respect which the Horonite chieftain proposed to yield to them as the emissaries of the king's honoured cup-bearer.

After a moment's pause, during which each party regarded the other with fixed attention, Sanballat said,—

"What is your errand with us?"

"We come," replied Benaiah, "to demand the release of two young maidens, countrywomen of our own, and who are also of our kindred. They were violently carried away yesterday from a hill-side near Jerusalem; and we have every reason to believe that the act was committed by the followers of one of the three princes now before me."

"We have not heard of any such act," replied Sanballat; "and we do not war against women, neither do we suffer our soldiers to do so. No Jewish maidens have entered the camp. Tobiah and Geshem, I appeal to you to confirm the truth of my assertion."

"You have said truly," answered the two chiefs.

"They were Arabians who bore away our sisters," said Adonijah, eagerly. "Surely they must have been some of the troops of Geshem, their chief. A large ransom will be given for their liberation, and the more promptly that is effected, the more liberal will be the reward. Let search be made throughout the camp, and whoever discovers the maidens shall be richly recompensed."

"The search would be fruitless," said Geshem, decidedly. "No one could bring prisoners into the camp without our knowledge, and no one would dare to conceal them."

"We thought," observed Sanballat, that you came from your governor with offers of peace and mutual alliance. We deemed that Nehemiah had shown the wisdom for which he is so famous by seeking our friendship and ceasing to

insult us, and encourage rebellion. Have you no message from the king's cup-bearer?"

"Nehemiah desired me to inform the chiefs who are confederate against him and his people, that he does not fear them. Our God is with us, and He hath prospered the work, and He will also strengthen us to finish it. Also, Nehemiah tells his enemies that he knows all their evil designs, and how they have conspired together to destroy the city and the servants of the Lord. But he has well fortified the walls and they are strongly built; and also every man that labours thereon is armed with a spear and a sword. There are also watchmen both by day and by night upon the towers; and on whatever side an enemy might approach, there would the watchman sound an alarm upon his trumpet, and a multitude would instantly be gathered together for defence. We are stronger than you, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, for the Lord our God is on our side, and He will give us the victory."

As Benaiah uttered these words, he saw the countenances of the chieftains change. There was less of defiance and more of anxiety to be read on their dark features. They had had no idea that their conspiracy had been reported to Nehemiah, or that he had taken such decided measures to counteract their schemes. They could not disbelieve Benaiah, they could not doubt that he felt the confidence which both his words and his countenance expressed, and they began to fear that it would be useless to attempt an assault on the city when her inhabitants were so well prepared to resist them, and their leader had made such prudent arrangements for defence.

Gladly would they have seized on Benaiah and his companion, and have wreaked on them the vengeance which they burned to execute on the whole Jewish race; but, as we have said, they did not dare thus to draw on themselves the anger of the king. In all their persecutions of the Jews they had affected to be influenced by motives of loyalty to the Persian government, and to believe that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were rebels, who would assert their independence, and set up a king, as soon as their city was fortified, and their own numbers sufficient to support their claim. On

this plea they had thwarted and opposed every attempt of the restored Israelites to rebuild Jerusalem, and set up her walls and gates ; and by their machinations and false reports to the Persian governors they had succeeded in their evil design, even until the arrival of the faithful and energetic Nehemiah. In him they found that the hated and despised Jews had a more powerful leader even than the learned and pious Ezra, and they began to doubt whether they could cope with him in battle or take his city by surprise. Stratagem and slander alone remained to them, and those weapons each of the three chiefs resolved to use.

On the part of his accomplices and himself, Sanballat now earnestly disclaimed all intention to assault the city, and professed a desire to form an alliance with the new governor. For this purpose he proposed that Nehemiah should meet him and his brother chiefs.

"Return to your master," he said to the young men, "and tell him that these are the words of Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem—Come, let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono, that we may make peace. If you and your people are true to the great King Artaxerxes, why should there be war between us any more?"

The other chiefs joined eagerly in this proposition, and Benaiah promised to convey the message to the governor. But the confederates "thought to do Nehemiah a mischief."



CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE Benaiah and Adonijah left the tent they made another attempt to discover some trace of their lost sisters, but it was in vain. In spite of their firm conviction that Zipporah and Rachel had been carried off by some of the followers of the Arabian chief, they failed to obtain any admission from him that could imply a knowledge of their capture.

Geshem was ardently desirous to obtain the rich ransom which Benaiah offered; but he feared to say one word before his allies which could give them any idea of his previous day's adventure. He could not trust his friends, for they were only his friends so long as it could promote their self-interest and forward their evil schemes.

In his secret mind the Arabian chief was reflecting how he could secure the coveted reward of his own cruel act without betraying himself to his confederates. So resolved was he to monopolise the profit to himself that he determined rather to relinquish the hope of present reward, and wait for an opportunity of disposing of his captives in some other manner, than to run any risk of Sanballat and Tobiah demanding a share of the spoils. Two such damsels as those whom he had captured would sell for a very large sum at Damascus, or any other considerable town to which he could convey them, and he hoped that he had so cleverly arranged his plans that neither his own associates nor the Jews could possibly detect him.

Sadly cast down and disappointed were Benaiah and Adonijah when they came forth from the presence of the chiefs, and prepared to remount and leave the camp. Caleb brought Benaiah's horse to him with a look of intelligence

on his countenance that attracted the young man's attention, and as he sprang into the saddle the Ammonite said, in a low voice, "May I attend you to the outskirts of the camp? I have news for my lord the Jewish chief."

Benaiah signified his assent, and rode slowly forward with Adonijah, followed by their attendants; while Caleb sauntered leisurely in the same direction, at some distance behind the party. It was not until they had passed through the farthest camp, and had wound round the slope of the hill that formed the southern boundary of the valley, that Benaiah paused, and waited for the Ammonite, who soon overtook them.

"Tell me your news quickly," said the impatient young Jew. "If it concerns the object of our coming here, and if you can give us any information of the lost maidens, you shall have no cause to repent of trying to serve us."

Caleb looked hastily around him, as if to ascertain whether he were observed, and then replied, "The young Jewesses were seized by Geshem and his followers. They are not in the camp, but hidden in one of the caverns in the hills beneath which you passed—those caverns in which they say your ancient kings lie buried."

"How did you ascertain this?" asked Benaiah. "And may we rely on its truth?"

"It is true, my lord. I heard it from Hared, one of the three Arabians who attended their chief on an expedition to survey the walls of your city. He alone returned with Geshem, while his comrades remained to guard the captives. What was designed to be their fate, Hared could not tell. He did not hear the last orders of his master."

"But how came the Arabian thus to betray his chieftain's secrets?"

"Hared is my friend," replied the Ammonite. "We are not of the same race, but my sister is his wife, and we are as brothers. I showed him your piece of gold, and told him of your promises. All that you give to me he will share. I can trust him, and you may trust me."

"I will do so," said Benaiah, looking earnestly into the man's face, as if to read his thoughts. "I believe that you speak the truth, and here is your reward." And so saying

he placed in his ready hands several pieces of gold. "If you would go with us and direct us to the spot where we might find our sisters, that reward should be doubled."

"I dare not," replied Caleb, looking wistfully at the bag of money which the young Jew had taken from his saddle-bags. "My life would not be safe if it were known that I had even followed you hither. I must hurry back to the camp—but I wish you success." And hastily concealing his prize in the folds of his girdle, he saluted the Jews, and hurried up the hill, that he might re-enter the valley by a circuitous route, and thus escape suspicion.

Benaiah and his cousin lost not a moment in acting on the information which they had received. Their souls were agitated by hopes and fears and many anxieties, and they found relief in rapid motion and eager conversation. Again their good steeds bore them on over hills and plains and rugged paths, until the cliffs in which the royal tombs were situated became dimly visible in the moonlight. Then they paused to rest, and to refresh themselves and their tired horses; for they knew that they could not prosecute their interesting search until daylight. A very simple meal of parched corn and dried fruits, which they had brought with them, sufficed for these hardy men, and then they lay down to sleep on the short green turf. Benaiah and his cousin kept watch alternately, for they well knew that not only was the country infested by bands of prowling robbers, but also that they might be subjected to the attack of bears or wolves or jackals, of which there were numbers to be met with in the more desolate parts of Judea.

At the first break of day they arose, and mounted their horses, and rode quickly to the foot of the hill in which they hoped to find Zipporah and Rachel concealed. They spread their followers along the winding paths that led to the various sepulchres, and they entered every tomb which they reached, and groped into every cavern and ravine, loudly calling on the names of their sisters; but no beloved forms met their eyes, and they began to doubt the truth of Caleb's report, or to fear that cruel vengeance had been wreaked on the lives of the defenceless girls. Still they continued their search, and still they ascended higher and higher up the

steep side of the cliff, and still they forbore to express to one another the fears that harrowed their own spirits, and the despair which was beginning to creep over them.

Benaiah pressed forward. He left Adonijah to complete the search of a sepulchre below, and felt himself impelled to mount to a more elevated platform. There he found a royal tomb, both large and magnificent in its adornments, and unusually well lighted by windows pierced through the face of the rock. He entered, and raised his voice, and shouted forth the names of Zipporah and Rachel, and again the echoes gave the only answer—and then a deep stillness followed.

"It is hopeless," he murmured to himself; "either the Ammonite has deceived us, or the ears of our loved ones are closed in death." The very thought was maddening, and Benaiah hastily strode round the sepulchre to drive it from him. As he returned towards the threshold his eye fell on an object that had not attracted his attention on his entrance. He sprang forward, and snatched it up eagerly, exclaiming, as he did so, "It is hers! it is Rachel's girdle! She must have been on this spot; and where is she now?—and where is my sister?"

Again he hurried to the farthest extremity of the cavern to ascertain whether there were any place of concealment in the depths of the rock, or any other indications of the late inhabitants of the royal tomb. But nothing more was to be discovered, and he again returned to the doorway, and examined the treasure which he had already found. As he opened its folds he observed a small portion of the substance then used as a substitute for paper—somewhat resembling vellum—and on this a few words were traced with a sharp instrument. While Benaiah was carefully endeavouring to decipher the writing Adonijah joined him, and eagerly lent his aid. The words were these,—

"We saw you pass. May the Lord guide you hither! If so, follow us to Mount Gilboa. There are caverns and tombs on the south side of the hill. There we are to be concealed until the Arab chief can carry out his plans."

Here was something definite to act upon; and the young men fervently offered up their praises to God, who had so

mercifully directed their steps to this spot. They lost no time in descending the hill, and collecting their scattered followers. One of them, whose name was Joab, they ordered to return instantly to Jerusalem, bearing Rachel's note, which he was to deliver to Abigail, with a message from her son, informing her that he and his cousin were gone in pursuit of their sisters, and would rescue them or perish in the attempt.

There was comfort in this message to the afflicted parents, inasmuch as it showed that some traces of the maidens had been discovered. But it also inspired them with anxiety for the safety of their sons, who they were well assured would fully act up to their promise, and would risk their own lives to restore their sisters to liberty.

Very fervently did those pious Jews join in prayer to the God in whom they trusted, that He would bless and protect all those so dear to them in this perilous enterprise; and then Jasher and Eleazar, who had been summoned from the walls to hear the tidings which Joab brought, hastened to communicate them to Nehemiah, and to ask for his further aid and counsel.



CHAPTER XXII.



WHEN Benaiah gave to Joab the note for his mother, he did not, in spite of his own eagerness and impatience, neglect to charge him also with the message from the confederate chiefs. He repeated it word for word, and Joab accompanied his master and Eleazar to the presence of the governor, and very accurately delivered it.

"My lord," he said, "thus spake the chiefs to Benaiah : ' Say to Nehemiah ; come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono, that we may make peace. Why should there be war between us any more, if ye are true servants of the great king ? ' "

"This is only another of their subtle efforts to deceive me, and to draw me away from the city," said Nehemiah, addressing Jasher and Eleazar. "Surely their designs are evil and treacherous ; I will not listen to their proposal."

The two fathers hesitated a moment, for the thought occurred to both their minds that if Nehemiah were to go and meet the chiefs, some arrangement might be made for the liberation of their beloved children. But they were true-hearted and faithful men. They felt assured that the governor's view of the proposal was probably the true one, and that it would be unwise for him to trust himself in any way in the power of his enemies. They would, therefore, not allow their personal feelings and wishes to influence them in the advice which they gave to Nehemiah.

"You must not go out to these men," they said. "You must not place yourself in their hands, lest mischief befall you, and the work of the Lord be hindered. We must leave our children to His mercy and protection, believing that all will be ordered for the good of those who trust in Him."





The captive maidens were again placed on the horses, and secured to the Arabs who guided them. Page 109.

"Your faith will not be unrewarded," replied Nehemiah, confidently. Then he turned to Joab and said, "Return to the camp to-morrow. At dawn of day two of my horsemen shall be ready to attend you. And say to Sanballat and the other chiefs: "Thus saith Nehemiah, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down; why should the work cease while I leave it and come down to you? Then come back to me, and tell me their reply."

Joab saluted the governor respectfully, and retired to rest and prepare for another long and fatiguing ride on the morrow. Then the governor continued to converse with his friends, and to arrange with them the best mode of assisting their sons in the search and rescue of the unhappy captives.

* * * * *

Very much terrified and dismayed were Zipporah and Rachel on that fatal evening when they were seized by the Arabs, and borne away in spite of their resistance, and all their cries for help. None heard their cries, and what resistance could they offer to the strength of their captors?

Swiftly they were dragged over the brow of the hill, and down the northern declivity, until they reached a spot where the horses of the Arabians were secured among some trees and thick bushes. Two of the men were ordered by Geshem to mount, and then he and his other attendant lifted the half-fainting Zipporah and Rachel upon the horses behind the Arabs, and bound them securely to the riders. Some words of direction were given to the men by their chief, and they rode away with their fair burdens, while Geshem and Hared galloped back to the camp to give, as we have already related, a false account of the expedition which the Arab had undertaken.

To the foot of the hill which contained the tombs of the kings of Judah the affrighted maidens were carried at full speed by the fleet horses of the wandering sons of Ishmael. There they were made to dismount, and were dragged up the winding pathway until they reached the most elevated of the sepulchres, and were given to understand that this was to be their dwelling for the night.

The men behaved courteously to them; and, while one of them kept guard at the entrance of the cave, the other

went to a hamlet at some distance, and procured both food and warm woollen wrappers for the maidens. They also replied readily to all the inquiries that Zipporah and Rachel made to them ; and from them they learnt that they were to be conveyed, on the following day, to mount Gilboa, and there to be concealed in one of its many caves or rock-hewn tombs, until their chief had made a satisfactory arrangement for their ransom.

This information calmed their troubled spirits and dispelled their worst fears, for they had dreaded lest they might be carried off to some distant town, beyond the boundaries of Judea, and there sold into ignominious slavery. Still their position was a very terrible one ; and it may well be imagined that when, on the following morning, they descried their brothers, whom they recognized by their dress and the horses they rode, passing along at the foot of the hill, with a band of armed followers, their hopes of a speedy liberation rose very high. And equally strong were their feelings of disappointment when they saw the troop pass by, unconscious of their near proximity, and unmindful of the loud call which they ventured to raise.

That call served, however, to arouse the slumbering guards, who, after a night of watching, had lain down to sleep on the threshold of the sepulchral chamber. They sprang to their feet, and hurried into the tomb in time to see Rachel waving her girdle from the opening that admitted light at the most distant part of the excavation. Somewhat rudely they dragged the girls from the opening, and commanded them to keep silence, threatening to bind up their mouths with their own girdles if they made any more such attempts.

Oh, if Benaiah and Adonijah had but known of the violence to which those so dearly loved were subjected, how soon would they have climbed that steep ascent, and have severely chastised the barbarians ! But they rode on unconsciously, and Zipporah and her gentle cousin were left to their fate. As soon as they were out of sight the Arabs informed their prisoners that they must prepare for their journey, and one of them went to saddle the horses, which were concealed near the foot of the hill, while the other again took his station outside the sepulchre.

Then it was that Rachel bethought her of leaving some sign of their presence in the cave, in the faint hope that it might be discovered by those for whom it was intended. With a pointed pin from her hair she wrote the words which we have recorded, and folded the slip in her girdle. A second and similar slip was also written, and wrapped in a small scarf that Zipporah wore round her neck; and this packet was secretly dropped at the foot of the hill. But it was not observed by those who came to search the rocks, and had not they been providentially led to the uppermost tomb, they would have been utterly at a loss whither to proceed.

The captive maids were again placed on the horses, and secured to the Arabs who guided them, and again they were borne swiftly away in a northern direction. As far as Anathoth they followed the same track which had just been trodden by the horses of the Jewish party; but there they diverged a little to the left, and never stopped until they reached the ancient Shiloh. There they found shelter for the night, their guards taking care that they held no communication with the inmates of the obscure inn to which they conducted them. One of them kept watch all night at the door of the rude chamber in which they slept, and at early dawn they were aroused, and, after taking some refreshment, were again mounted on the Arab steeds and carried away towards mount Gilboa.

Along the lovely plain at the foot of the mountains of Ephraim lay their route; and, had Zipporah and Rachel been more free from fears and anxiety, they would very greatly have enjoyed their ride. To the former especially it could not fail to be extremely interesting, as the scenery everywhere around presented an aspect so entirely different to that to which she had been accustomed in Assyria; and still more because of the associations which connected many of the spots which they passed with events in the by-gone history of her own people.

The huge and rounded summits of mount Gerizim and mount Ebal rose high above the rest of the range, and stood out conspicuous, to remind the passers-by of the blessings and curses that were pronounced on those two

elevated positions, after the Lord had brought His people into the land of their inheritance. "Ar-Gerizim," or "*The mountain of the Most High*," was also known to Zipporah as the place where Melchizedec ministered to the "*Most High God*," and where he met the patriarch Abraham, and received from him an offering in acknowledgment of his priestly office. The elevation of this mountain above all the neighbouring hills may have caused it to be especially dedicated to the honour of God; for ancient historians describe it as the "highest of all the mountains of Samaria.

And there was yet another tradition connected with "Ar-Gerizim," that caused both the young girls to gaze at it with a deep and solemn interest. It had been described to them as the scene of that great trial of their father Abraham's faith, where he was commanded to offer up his son Isaac. They did not fully understand the deep significance of that event, they did not know how beautifully it typified the future offering up of the Son of God by His Eternal Father, as an atonement for the sins of the whole world; but they had been taught to regard it as one of the most important transactions in all the history of their chosen race, and as one which foreshadowed some far greater event, in which not only the Jews, but all the nations of the earth would be concerned. We give the story as it has ever been preserved in Samaritan tradition.

"Beyond all doubt," they say, "Isaac was offered on Ar-Gerizim. Abraham said, 'Let us go and sacrifice on the mountain.' He took a rope to fasten his son; but Isaac said, 'No, I will lie still.' Thrice the knife refused to cut. Then God from heaven called to Gabriel, 'Go down and save Isaac, or, I will destroy thee from among the angels.' From the seventh heaven Gabriel called and pointed to the ram. The place of the ram's capture is still shewn near the Holy Place."

Such was the belief of Zipporah and her cousin. They may have been in error, but the belief gave a double interest to the striking scenery, and caused them for a time to forget the evils of their position.

CHAPTER XXIII.

 CROSS the lower part of the fertile plain of Esdraelon the captive maids were borne. Since they had left Shiloh the Arabs had slackened their speed, for they feared no pursuit; and now they rode leisurely among the corn-fields and olive-groves that enriched the wide-spreading prospect. The ranges of Gilboa and the Little Hermon, as well as the other neighbouring hills, were bare of vegetation, and they formed a striking contrast to the verdant and fruitful plain.

As the horsemen drew near to mount Gilboa, and they marked its barren and desolate aspect, their thoughts reverted to the sad day of king Saul's defeat by the Philistines; and of his own suicide, and the slaughter of his three sons. These were not cheering recollections; and as Zipporah and Rachel were compelled to toil up the steep ascent of the mountain, and again to seek shelter in a gloomy sepulchre, tears rose to their eyes, and they sat down weary and dejected on the cold floor, and tried to comfort one another with hopes of a speedy liberation which neither of them was able to realize to herself. Would their friends ever discover the notes which they had left behind them? And, if such were happily the case, would they be able to trace them to their present desolate abode? Such questions filled their inmost hearts with fear and anxiety, and the countenance of each betrayed to her companion much more uneasiness than either of them expressed in words.

In order to facilitate any search that might be made for them, each of the girls had, before leaving the inn at Shiloh, taken off a portion of the long scarf or veil which

she wore over her head and shoulders, and had torn it into shreds; and these shreds they contrived dexterously to drop, unobserved by their conductors, on the pathway from the foot of mount Gilboa even to the threshold of their sepulchral prison.

Before they lay down on the wrappers which had been provided for them by the Arabs, the young Jewesses lifted up their hearts and voices in fervent prayer to the God in whom alone they trusted for deliverance; and they sang together one of the psalms which the royal shepherd composed when he was in a sore strait, and hiding from his deadly foes in dens and caves of the mountains. They prayed and sang in their own grand Hebrew tongue, which their guards did not understand; but so sweet and plaintive were their voices, that even those rude men were moved to pity, and led to treat them with greater gentleness and consideration.

The Arabs believed that their prisoners were safe in this distant retreat from all chance of discovery or release. They had no idea that any intimation of the route they had taken could have been conveyed to the friends of the unhappy girls, and therefore, on the following morning, they relaxed in their watchfulness, and even permitted Zipporah and Rachel to wander on the hill-side as far as they could keep them in sight.

How eagerly did the maidens strain their eyes to gaze over the plain, in the faint hope of seeing some friends coming to their aid! But they were obliged at mid-day to seek the welcome shelter of the gloomy tomb, to shield them from the ardent rays of the summer sun, without having discerned any human being approaching towards mount Gilboa. They were sad and weary; and they fell into a deep sleep, while the Arabs did the same outside the sepulchre. Perhaps they dreamed of home, and of loved faces there; or perhaps they saw visions of young and manly forms coming to their rescue; if so, their dreams were more real than is usually the case.

Whose voices were those that sounded in their ears so softly and yet so startlingly? Zipporah and Rachel sprang up, and gazed, almost wildly from surprise, at their brothers,

who stood by them, as thankful and as joyful as themselves.

After the first hasty and agitated greetings were over, Rachel's fears returned. "Where are the Arabs?" she exclaimed, hastily. "O Adonijah, if they return and find you here, some evil will befall you."

"Do not fear for us, dear Rachel," said Benaiah, eager to dispel her evident alarm, and interrupting the reply of her brother. "The Arabs can neither harm us nor terrify you any more."

"You have not slain them, Benaiah?" said the gentle girl, while the blood mounted quickly to her face, and then receded, leaving it deadly pale. "They were not cruel to us—they gave us food and warm coverings. They only obeyed their chief in bringing us hither."

"You plead earnestly for your enemies, Rachel," replied Benaiah, smiling. "Do not be uneasy for them! They are safe, but they are now our prisoners, and must change situations with you and Zipporah. Thanks to your ingenuity, we were made acquainted with your present hiding-place. A friend in the camp betrayed that you were at first concealed in the royal tombs. There we found your letter and this girdle, which"—he added, taking it from the folds of his vest, where it had been carefully secreted—"I must keep as a memorial of our success."

Rachel only smiled consent; and proceeded with her inquiries.

"And how did you trace us to this spot? And how did you make prisoners of our watchful Arab guards?"

"Again we were indebted to your and my sister's cunning devices. When we approached this mountain, and saw its extent, and the number and variety of the caves that seem to pierce it in every direction, we felt almost in despair of finding you before Geshem might arrive to claim his captives, and to resist our better claim. But when we reached the foot of the cliff, and saw a portion of what we instantly recognized as belonging to you, we were filled with confidence, and we quickly followed your traces, and found that they led to this cavern."

"But the Arabs, Benaiah; tell me how you secured them?"

"We came silently up the pathway, with the intention of surprising and overpowering them, and even *slaying them*, Rachel, if that should have been necessary to procure your freedom. But happily it was not so. The blessed sun had already overpowered them, and rendered them helpless. They were seized and bound before they could draw their swords, or snatch up their spears."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Rachel, fervently. "And now tell me, Benaiah, what are you going to do with these men? Not to carry them away on your horses, as they bore us hither?"

"No, we have no need of them. We do not care for their ransom. We propose to take their horses for you and Zipporah, and to leave the Arabs bound to a tree at the foot of the hill, until we have conveyed you to a considerable distance towards Shiloh. One of our attendants will remain here for an hour or two, and then he will release one of the captives, and follow us at full speed, leaving them to return on foot to the camp, and tell Geshem how utterly his cruel scheme has failed."

"You will return the horses, will you not, when we are safe in Jerusalem?"

"Certainly, my fair cousin; after they have been honoured by bearing you and Zipporah home in safety, they shall be restored to their owners, to show that the Jews scorn to commit a robbery, even on their rapacious enemies."

"Benaiah," interrupted Adonijah, who had all this time been giving Zipporah the same details that so greatly interested her cousin Rachel; "Benaiah, if you continue to talk so fluently, we shall not reach any place of shelter and safety before nightfall; we have no time to lose."

"Very true," replied Benaiah. "Let us descend the hill. No doubt our two prisoners are already at its foot, and bound to the trees where their horses were tethered."

The party soon reached the spot, where they found the Arabs safely secured; and ere long they were on their way to the south, free from all apprehensions and anxieties, and able to converse gaily on their past adventures, and look forward joyfully to the happy meeting which awaited them at Jerusalem.

To their surprise the Jew who had been left to guard the captive Arabs overtook them before an hour had elapsed. He rode at a gallop, and showed signs of considerable satisfaction when he had safely rejoined his party.

"How is this, Reuben?" said Benaiah. "Have you already released your prisoners?"

"I did not set them free," replied Reuben, panting for breath. "But they are at liberty; and doubtless they are now in close pursuit of their lost prizes. Do not pause, my lord Benaiah," continued the man, eagerly. "The ladies must be placed in safety without delay: Ride on quickly, and I will tell you what occurred as we proceed."

Benaiah caught the rein of Rachel's horse, and started at a rapid pace. Adonijah would have done the same to Zipporah's steed; but she was of a different spirit to her gentle cousin, and far more accustomed to travelling on horseback than Rachel had ever been. She declined all aid, and rode fearlessly and gracefully on with her companions while Reuben told his story.

"I was pacing to and fro rather impatiently and watching the moving shadows, that I might know when my time for a start had arrived, when I observed a body of horsemen coming across the plain from the south-east. At first I could not discern to what race they belonged, or guess their object. But on glancing at my prisoners I saw looks of intelligence passing between them, and an expression of triumphant joy lighting up their countenances—that told me they had discovered friends in that distant party. So rapidly did they advance that, before I could untether and mount my horse, they were near enough for me to distinguish that they were Arabians, and that they were led by Geshem, their prince. Two of them led horses without riders; and these I supposed to be intended to carry away the lady Zipporah and her cousin. I waited no longer, but sprang on my horse, and followed you. Several of the Arabs tried to cut off my retreat, but in vain. I have, however, no doubt that the whole body are now on our track; and it might fare ill with us if they were to overtake us."

In the latter sentiment all the party cordially agreed;

and they showed how little they desired an encounter with their pursuers by increasing their speed, and urging their good horses forward.

For some time they saw no traces of the Arabs, although Rachel was continually and anxiously looking back, and leaving all the management of her horse to Benaiah. At length they came to a rising ground, which compelled them to give their horses breath; and as they ascended towards the highest point Benaiah turned round, and, to his dismay, beheld their pursuers just coming in sight, and galloping at wild speed, amidst a cloud of dust.

"Forward!" he cried; and again the fugitives were in rapid motion. "If we can reach that village which I can just discern in the far-off distance, we are safe. It is the hamlet where we paused to feed our horses, Adonijah, and where the inhabitants were so friendly. Courage, dear Rachel! do not look so terrified! We shall escape our cruel foes, or I will die in your defence."

But the death of her cousin in her defence was by no means an alternative that Rachel wished to realize, she only begged Benaiah to proceed faster and faster, and assured him that she was neither terrified nor fatigued, when all the while her cheeks were becoming more deadly pale, and her limbs more powerless. It was a hard ride for a young girl who had never been subjected to any such violent exertion, and who was of a very gentle and even timid spirit.



CHAPTER XXIV.

IN the dwelling of Jasher there was great anxiety. The note which Joab had brought from Benaiah had told the bereaved parents enough of the fate of their daughters, and the plans of their sons for their sisters' rescue, to fill them with apprehension and uneasiness, both for the captive maidens and for those who had hastened to their aid, and who might possibly only share in their calamity.

A considerable body of armed men was sent out by order of the governor, under Jasher's command, purposing to proceed with all possible despatch on the road towards mount Gilboa, and to endeavour to obtain tidings of Benaiah and his companions, and join them in their search. It was well that this step was taken, as we shall soon have occasion to relate.

The village which Benaiah had pointed out to his companions became every moment more visible as the intervening distance was lessened; but the troop of ruthless pursuers also became more distinguishable, for they gained upon them sensibly.

Benaiah's attention was riveted on Rachel. Her lips were white and quivering, her eyes were half-closed, and her horse's bridle hung loosely in her failing grasp.

"Bear up a little longer, my sweet cousin," said Zipporah, in a voice of encouragement; "one more effort and we are safe!"

But Rachel did not hear her, neither did she feel the strong arm of Benaiah, as he drew up the horses for one moment, and caught her falling form, and lifted her before him on the powerful steed which he rode. Again they

bounded forward, but that pause, that slackened pace, would have proved fatal to them had not aid been nigh.

The Arabs were advancing on their rear. They could hear the clattering of their horses' hoofs, and even the muttered curses and threats of vengeance that broke from the exasperated chief and his followers.

A clump of thick trees now came between the fugitives and their hoped-for place of refuge. Benaiah saw that, encumbered as he now was with the fainting form of Rachel, it would be impossible for him to pass through the thicket before their pursuers overtook them ; and to follow the pathway that led round it would give the Arabs an advantage, as they would not hesitate to dash into the grove, and endeavour thus to get before them ere they could reach the village. In that case they would have no choice but to fight for the prize they had rescued ; and Benaiah—the brave Benaiah—shuddered as he looked on the pale unconscious face that leaned against his shoulder, and thought of the possible consequence of an encounter with the enraged Arabs.

Silently he lifted up his heart to God, and urging his panting horse to one final effort, he led the way round the grove.

As he supposed, the Arabs came up and instantly dashed into the thicket, crushing and breaking the low underwood in their way. They were soon out of sight ; and Benaiah began to reflect whether it would be possible now to turn aside from the road and seek some other shelter. But all was one wide meadow. There was neither forest nor mountain nor habitation towards which they could direct their steps. They must meet their foes, and fight hand to hand with a number greatly superior to their own, trusting that God would help them in their righteous conflict.

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What noise was that which came faintly and confusedly from the far side of the wood, and became more distinct each moment as they advanced ? Surely it was the clash of arms—the ringing of swords and spears—and the shouts and cries of combatants.

“Those who fight with Geshem and his men must be our

friends!" cried Benaiah, exultingly. "Ride on, Adonijah, and ascertain what is going on, and return here quickly. I will take care of your sister and Zipporah."

Adonijah galloped forward, followed by Reuben; and soon a loud shout reached the ears of those who remained behind—and they knew that the voices were those of their own countrymen.

Again they advanced on their way, and met Adonijah returning with the joyful news that succour had indeed arrived, and that the Arabs were fully occupied in defending themselves from the fierce assault of a strong party of Jewish soldiers.

"I must hasten back to assist their valiant leader. I leave my sister to you, Benaiah, as you have made yourself her guardian!" said Adonijah, laughingly to his cousin. And then he galloped away to where the din of battle still rang loudly.

For a time it continued unabated: and Benaiah advanced slowly and cautiously—for he feared lest the eyes of the maidens should behold sights to shock and distress them. The pause had given Rachel time to recover her senses, and she could listen to the words of comfort and encouragement that were uttered by Benaiah and Zipporah, and she could comprehend that help had providentially arrived, and that the danger was past. But she still looked pale and scared, and was still in a state of such exhaustion as to be unable to support herself.

Suddenly the clanging of weapons ceased, and only shouts were heard, as of fugitives and pursuers. Then a rushing sound passed through the wood, and from the spot where they had entered, the Arab troops were seen to ride forth at speed, but with their numbers thinned. Another party advanced to meet the liberated maidens and their conductors, and in a few moments Zipporah found herself in the arms of her father.

To the friendly village the whole party repaired, and there they found needful rest and refreshment, which quickly restored even Rachel's strength and spirits. There also the wounded Arabs were brought and were carefully tended; Zipporah and Rachel assisting in all that was done for their

relief, and cheering them with kind words and kinder actions.

The journey to Jerusalem occupied two days, for Rachel was unequal to performing it without a pause. But Reuben was sent forward with the joyful news of the recovery of the lost girls; and when they reached the city they found all their family, and many of their kindred and acquaintance, gathered together at the north gate to meet and welcome them.

Great were the rejoicings on the happy occasion, and fervent and sincere were the thanksgivings that were offered up by all the grateful family in that temple which now reared its head in the midst of Jerusalem, and where the worship of the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob was again duly celebrated.

Other ceremonies, which also had the sanction of religion, were shortly afterwards celebrated in the dwelling of Jasher. There were vows exchanged, and there were blessings pronounced, and there were prayers offered up, and the families of Jasher and Eleazar became more closely connected than they were before.

Benaiah obtained Eleazar's willing consent that Rachel should be his bride, and a solemn betrothal immediately took place between the young couple. It was followed in due time by a marriage, which proved an eminently happy one, because it was entered on with feelings of well-founded affection, and it was hallowed by a true and lively faith and confidence in God.

It may perhaps have been anticipated that Adonijah would solicit the same favour from Jasher which Benaiah obtained so readily from Eleazar. Such was indeed the case, and as Zipporah was a willing party to the arrangement, the double marriage took place on the same day, and with very equal prospects of happiness.

The zeal and ability of Nehemiah, sanctified by his deep piety and his unbounded trust in God, were successful in restoring peace and order, and a good measure of outward prosperity to Jerusalem and her inhabitants; and in putting an end to the machinations of all his wily enemies. He has left us a record of his undaunted courage, his persevering patience, and his unwearied efforts for the good of his

people, and still more for the honour and glory of his God. And that record is told so simply, so humbly, and with such entire forgetfulness of his own part in all the transactions which he relates, that our admiration of his character is enhanced, and we perceive how worthy an instrument in God's hand was the Persian king's cup-bearer, to build again the walls of Jerusalem and set up her gates and her houses, and to restore the ancient worship of the God of Israel, and to re-establish the laws which had so long been neglected.

Had such men as Nehemiah continued to rule in Jerusalem, and to set an example of such exalted piety, we fancy that her temple might never have been razed to the ground, and her walls might still be standing. But Jerusalem had rebelled against her God, and she has again become a by-word and a desolation.





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